

Venezuela: Delcy Rodríguez and Bolivarian Post-Populism

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Introduction

On January 3, 2026, after U.S. military forces carried out a coordinated operation against Venezuelan military installations, ports, airfields, and command centers, capturing Nicolás Maduro and Cilia Flores, Venezuela appeared to be heading toward an unpredictable escalation. In the preceding months, Maduro had repeatedly warned that any military intervention would turn Venezuela into a “second Vietnam”, promising prolonged resistance against any foreign aggression. In this context of maximum tension, the person expected to assume control of the government in his absence delivered a startling message.

“We extend an invitation to the U.S. government to work jointly on an agenda of cooperation, oriented toward shared development, within the framework of international law and aimed at strengthening lasting community coexistence”, declared Delcy Rodríguez in her first international address as Venezuela’s acting president (Rodríguez, 2026).

The statement was difficult to reconcile with more than two decades of fierce anti-imperialist rhetoric. Just one day earlier, the United States had carried out the largest military operation against the Venezuelan government since the rise of Chavismo. Yet rather than announcing reprisals or calling for national and international resistance, Rodríguez publicly extended an olive branch to Washington.

Months later, that message appears to carry a different meaning. What may initially have been interpreted as a tactical response to a moment of extreme vulnerability ultimately anticipated a deeper transformation. The opening to U.S. investment, the moderation of anti-imperialist rhetoric, market-oriented economic reforms, and the search for new sources of legitimacy suggest that Chavismo is undergoing a far-reaching process of political redefinition.

The transformation observed under Delcy Rodríguez may be interpreted as the emergence of a postpopulist phase of Chavismo. The term is used here in an exploratory sense to describe a situation in which a political movement preserves many of the symbols and identities forged during its populist stage while deriving legitimacy from mechanisms different from those that originally enabled its rise.

This raises a question that extends beyond the Venezuelan context: how can a political movement abandon so quickly principles that it presented as non-negotiable for more than two decades without experiencing a significant internal rupture? What does this transformation reveal about the nature of Chavismo and, more broadly, about the capacity of populist movements to survive when they lose both their leader and a substantial portion of their social base?

1. The Observed Changes

Five months after Nicolás Maduro’s departure from power, at the time of writing, Chavismo is undergoing a transformation that is difficult to ignore. Although its leading figures continue to claim a Bolivarian identity and affirm the institutional continuity of the project initiated by Hugo Chávez, several decisions adopted by Delcy Rodríguez’s administration reflect a significant departure from the pillars that for more than two decades defined the movement’s political identity. A report published by the NGO Laboratorio de Paz documented many of these transformations (Laboratorio de Paz, 2026).

The transformation has not been limited to diplomatic language. In the months that followed, the new administration promoted a policy of sustained rapprochement with Washington. U.S. officials who played significant roles in the January 3 operation were later received on official visits to Caracas, including senior intelligence and security officials. Such meetings would have been almost unimaginable within the logic of confrontation that characterized relations between the two governments during earlier phases of Chavismo.

A second change can be observed in the economic sphere. For years, the Bolivarian project presented itself as an alternative to neoliberalism and free-market economics. The expansion of state ownership, control over strategic sectors of the economy, and the central redistributive role of the state were essential components of its discourse. Yet the principal economic decisions adopted by the Rodríguez administration point in a different direction. The accelerated reform of the Hydrocarbons Law, the new Organic Mining Law, regulatory liberalization, the explicit promotion of foreign investment, and the opening of strategic sectors to new private actors reflect an orientation closer to economic liberalization than to the

state-centered model associated with so-called Twenty-First Century Socialism.

A third change concerns the way political legitimacy is constructed. During Hugo Chávez's presidency, and to a lesser extent during Nicolás Maduro's early years in office, constant appeals to "the people" through elections, consultations, mobilization campaigns, and plebiscitary confrontations constituted a central mechanism for reproducing political power. By contrast, Delcy Rodríguez's administration appears to rely less on popular mobilization and more on elite negotiations, international agreements, economic stabilization, and the internal reorganization of the governing coalition. The center of gravity of the political system no longer seems to reside in the direct relationship between leadership and the masses, but rather in the preservation of balances among state, military, and international actors.

Finally, a transformation can also be observed in the government's declared priorities. Whereas historical Chavismo justified many of its decisions in the name of revolution, socialism, or the construction of a communal state, the current discourse emphasizes concepts such as stability, economic recovery, governability, and the normalization of international relations. Revolutionary language has not disappeared entirely, but it appears to have lost centrality to a narrative focused on management and institutional survival.

Taken individually, each of these changes could be interpreted as a pragmatic adaptation to exceptional circumstances. Taken together, however, they suggest something deeper, a redefinition of Chavismo's political identity. The question, therefore, is no longer what changes the movement is undertaking, but rather, how can a political force modify so rapidly principles that it presented for years as non-negotiable without experiencing a significant internal rupture?

2. Chavismo as a Populist Project

To understand the transformation currently taking place within Chavismo, it is necessary to recall the foundations upon which it originally built its legitimacy. Although there are multiple definitions of populism and an extensive academic debate regarding its characteristics, the Venezuelan experience can be understood as a paradigmatic case of political leadership organized around a charismatic figure who established a direct relationship with broad sectors of the population, presenting himself as the embodiment of the popular will against political and economic elites perceived as responsible for the national crisis.

Max Weber defined charismatic authority as a form of domination based on the belief that an individual possesses

extraordinary qualities that distinguish them from others and make them an object of trust, admiration, and obedience. Unlike legal-rational authority, which rests on institutions and rules, charismatic authority is grounded in the personal relationship between leader and followers. Its strength lies in its capacity to mobilize intense loyalties; its weakness lies in its difficulty surviving the disappearance of the leader (Weber, 2002).

Hugo Chávez's political trajectory exhibited many of the characteristics identified by Weber. From the moment he came to power in 1999, he succeeded in establishing a direct relationship with broad sectors of Venezuelan society, particularly among those who felt excluded from the political system that emerged after 1958. His leadership transcended the boundaries of a conventional political party and became the principal organizing force of the Bolivarian movement.

The legitimacy of Chavismo rested on three complementary pillars. The first was Chávez's charismatic leadership. The second was the construction of a political subject identified as "the people," simultaneously portrayed as victims of traditional elites and protagonists of a historical transformation. The third was an ideological imaginary that combined nationalism, anti-imperialism, social redistribution, and references to Twenty-First Century Socialism.

These three elements reinforced one another. Charismatic leadership enabled the mobilization of the people; popular mobilization legitimized the leader; and ideological narratives provided historical meaning to both. For more than a decade, the combination of leadership, people, and ideology endowed Chavismo with an exceptional capacity for mobilization and internal cohesion within the Latin American political landscape.

Yet this very configuration contained a vulnerability. The more dependent the project became on the relationship between Chávez and his followers, the more uncertain its future would become once the figure who constituted its principal source of legitimacy disappeared.

3. The Problem of Succession

The death of Hugo Chávez on March 5, 2013 transformed that potential vulnerability into a concrete political problem. The challenge was not simply to designate a new president. It was to preserve the cohesion of a movement whose identity was intimately tied to an irreplaceable figure.

Aware of this difficulty, Chávez attempted to resolve the succession problem before his death by publicly designating Nicolás Maduro as his political heir. Yet the mechanism that allowed for the transfer of institutional authority could not guarantee the transfer of charisma. Maduro inherited the

government, the party, the state apparatus, and control over the country's principal institutions, but he failed to reproduce the emotional bond that Chávez had built with broad sectors of the population. As Anselmi (2017) has argued, Chávez's disappearance generated a crisis of political representation that compelled the Bolivarian movement to search for new sources of legitimacy.

During his first years in power, Maduro's principal source of legitimacy was not an authority of his own, but rather his status as the continuator of Chávez's legacy. Chávez's image remained omnipresent in official speeches, electoral campaigns, state symbolism, and partisan mobilizations. Rather than replacing the founder, Maduro attempted to govern in his name.

This strategy, however, faced growing limitations. The deepening economic crisis, the deterioration of public services, rising social conflict, and massive emigration progressively eroded the government's legitimacy. Symbolic references to Chávez proved insufficient to offset the effects of a crisis that directly affected the daily lives of millions of Venezuelans.

The government's response was not to construct new forms of political identification comparable to those that had characterized the Chávez era. Instead, the preservation of power increasingly depended on institutional control, the cohesion of governing elites, the role of the armed forces, and the state's capacity to manage social and political conflict through coercion.

Maduro succeeded in retaining power, but under conditions fundamentally different from those that had enabled the rise and consolidation of Chavismo. The succession had been institutionally successful but politically incomplete. The movement survived the disappearance of its founder, even as it became increasingly difficult to sustain the forms of legitimacy that had originally given it life.

4. A Populism Without a People

Populist movements are typically defined by the privileged relationship they establish between political leadership and the people. The people are not merely a rhetorical reference; they constitute the principal source of legitimacy for the project.

For much of the first decade of the twenty-first century, Chavismo succeeded in building an effective relationship with broad sectors of Venezuelan society. Hugo Chávez's successive electoral victories, the expansion of social programs financed by oil revenues, and a sustained capacity for political mobilization helped consolidate a substantial social base. Chavismo did not merely speak in the name of the people; a significant portion

of the people genuinely recognized themselves in it (Uzcátegui, 2010).

This situation began to change progressively over the following decade. Economic crisis, hyperinflation, deteriorating public services, mass emigration, and rising poverty eroded the legitimacy accumulated during the years of expansion. The parliamentary defeat of 2015 constituted the first decisive electoral indication of this shift. The protests of 2014 and 2017, as well as the presidential election of July 28, 2024, confirmed a deeper trend: the gradual weakening of the relationship between the movement and broad sectors of society.

Yet the most significant aspect of this process was not merely the loss of popular support. It was Chavismo's capacity to adapt to that loss.

As its capacity for popular mobilization declined, other resources became increasingly important for ensuring political continuity: institutional control, the cohesion of the governing coalition, the coercive capacity of the state, and the strategic management of electoral processes. The center of gravity of the political system gradually shifted from mobilization to administration.

In this sense, the challenge faced by Chavismo was not simply the loss of Hugo Chávez. The deeper challenge consisted of learning how to govern under conditions in which the people were no longer the principal source of political legitimacy. The movement survived the disappearance of its founder. What is far more difficult to determine is whether it managed to preserve the popular bond that originally gave rise to its legitimacy.

5. What Happens to Ideology?

The transformation of Chavismo raises an additional question. If the movement has been able to modify long-standing positions regarding the economy, the United States, and the role of the state without experiencing significant internal fractures, what role does ideology continue to play within the governing coalition?

During the Chávez era, the socialist, anti-imperialist, and revolutionary imaginary fulfilled multiple functions. It not only offered an interpretation of the world and a horizon of social transformation. It also provided collective identity, fostered internal cohesion, and distinguished the movement from its adversaries. The revolution appeared as a promise oriented toward the future.

The changes observed under Delcy Rodríguez suggest a transformation in this function. Ideology has not disappeared, but it no longer operates primarily as an instrument of

mobilization. Instead, its role appears to be shifting toward the preservation of a shared memory and the symbolic legitimization of political continuity. Rather than organizing the future, ideology increasingly organizes the past.

This transformation helps explain why rapprochement with the United States, economic liberalization, and the moderation of anti-imperialist rhetoric have not generated the kinds of internal ruptures one might expect. The new narrative does not reject the Chavista legacy; it reinterprets it. Cooperation with Washington is no longer presented as an ideological concession but rather as an expression of sovereignty, stability, or national interest, under a political formula summarized in the slogan, “Delcy moves forward; you have my trust.”

The revolution thus ceases to function primarily as a promise of permanent transformation and instead becomes a symbolic resource that provides continuity to a political project undergoing adaptation. The Bolivarian imaginary remains important for preserving the internal cohesion of the governing coalition, but it appears to play a less decisive role in the production of political legitimacy.

This transformation helps illuminate the current stage. If leadership, the people, and ideology constituted the principal sources of legitimacy during the Chávez years, post-January 3 Venezuela appears to be searching for new ways to justify and reproduce power. It is precisely this transition that makes it possible to speak of the emergence of a possible Bolivarian post-populism.

6. The Role of the Opposition in the Adaptation Process

The adaptive capacity demonstrated by Chavismo in recent years cannot be explained solely through internal factors. It must also be analyzed in relation to the limitations of its political adversaries. The transformation of a governing coalition depends, in part, on the ability of the opposition to capitalize on contradictions, construct credible alternatives, and contest the regime’s sources of legitimacy.

In theory, the changes promoted by Delcy Rodríguez’s administration should have created significant opportunities for opposition forces. The moderation of anti-imperialist rhetoric, economic liberalization, the search for foreign investment, and the normalization of relations with the United States all involve the partial adoption of positions that had long been defended by different sectors of Venezuela’s democratic opposition.

Yet rather than strengthening its adversaries, this transformation appears to have reduced some of their spaces for political differentiation. By selectively incorporating demands

historically associated with the opposition, the governing coalition manages to present itself simultaneously as a guarantor of stability and as an agent of change. In doing so, it shifts part of political competition away from the economic and international arenas and toward domains in which it retains significant advantages, including institutional control, state capacity, and the management of political timing.

This phenomenon also has implications for international legitimacy. For years, much of the external recognition enjoyed by the Venezuelan opposition was linked to its defense of competitive elections, international reintegration, economic recovery, and the restoration of constructive relations with Western democracies. Delcy Rodríguez’s strategy has consisted, in part, of appropriating some of these banners without substantially altering the existing distribution of power within Venezuela’s political system.

From this perspective, Bolivarian post-populism does not merely transform Chavismo. It also reconfigures the political space in which its adversaries operate. The opposition no longer confronts only a coalition that invokes revolution and confrontation with the West. It must compete with a project that seeks to present itself simultaneously as the heir to Chavismo and as a guarantor of stability, economic growth, and international normalization.

The adaptation of Chavismo, therefore, cannot be understood solely as a story of governmental survival. It also reflects the difficulties faced by opposition forces in maintaining political initiative within a context where some of their historical demands have been selectively incorporated by the governing coalition itself.

Conclusion

When Ernesto Laclau defined populism as a political logic based on the construction of a people capable of challenging the hegemony of dominant elites, he moved the analysis beyond individual leadership and ideological programs (Laclau, 2005). From this perspective, populism fundamentally consists of the articulation of collective identities that transform dispersed demands into a common political will.

For much of its history, Chavismo appeared to embody this logic successfully. Hugo Chávez managed to articulate demands for social inclusion, political recognition, economic redistribution, and national sovereignty around the construction of a popular subject that recognized itself as the protagonist of a historical transformation. The people were not merely a discursive reference. They were a mobilized political force that provided legitimacy, identity, and collective agency to the Bolivarian project.

Yet the evolution observed in recent years raises questions that the literature on populism has only partially explored. Chávez's death deprived the movement of its principal charismatic leader. The prolonged economic and social crisis eroded a substantial portion of the popular base that had sustained its expansion. The changes promoted under Delcy Rodríguez's leadership also suggest a growing distance from several of the principles that, for decades, were presented as constitutive elements of the Bolivarian Revolution.

The transformation observed since January 2026 suggests that Chavismo has responded to these losses by seeking new sources of legitimacy. Stability partially replaces mobilization. Management becomes more important than charisma. Negotiation displaces confrontation. Governability increasingly occupies the place once held by revolutionary epic.

At the same time, the governing coalition has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to appropriate sources of legitimacy that once seemed to belong to its adversaries. The normalization of relations with the United States, economic liberalization, and the search for international recognition are no longer exclusively opposition banners. They have become part of the adaptation strategy of a movement seeking to preserve power under conditions fundamentally different from those that gave rise to it.

This evolution compels us to reconsider conventional interpretations of Chavismo. Rather than representing either simple continuity or complete rupture, what appears to be emerging is a hybrid political form: a project that retains symbols, historical references, and identity elements from the original Chavista experience while deriving legitimacy through mechanisms different from those that enabled its rise.

The adaptation under way does not only transform Chavismo. It also alters the conditions under which its adversaries operate. By partially appropriating demands historically associated with the opposition, the governing coalition reduces opportunities for programmatic differentiation and forces a reconsideration of traditional strategies of political contestation. The transition toward a possible Bolivarian post-populism therefore represents a challenge not only for Chavismo but also for those seeking to build a democratic alternative.

Perhaps, then, the most relevant question for understanding contemporary Venezuela is no longer whether Chavismo will survive Hugo Chávez. The experience of the past decade suggests that it can. The real question is different, what kind of political regime emerges when a governing coalition succeeds in surviving its leader, a significant portion of its social base, and even some of the principles it once claimed were non-negotiable?

The answer to that question extends beyond the Venezuelan case. It also speaks to broader debates within the study of populism. If populism is defined by the construction of a people as the primary source of political legitimacy, Venezuela's recent experience invites us to explore a largely understudied possibility, that of a movement that survives after the people cease to be the principal foundation of its legitimacy. It may be in that transition, rather than in populism itself, that one of the keys to understanding both the current evolution of Chavismo and the changing forms of contemporary political domination can be found.

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