

Rubio's Viceroyalty of Venezuela: A Blueprint for Cuba?



U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio has never been to Venezuela, yet the country is in his hands (Source: [Michael Vadon/Commons/CC-BY-SA 4.0](#))

Following the abduction of Nicolás Maduro by U.S. special forces in January 2026 and the devastating [earthquake in June](#), a system of control has taken hold in Venezuela that effectively makes U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio the regent of a sovereign state.

What the *New York Times* openly [describes](#) as a “de facto viceroyalty”—and what Chavista analysts denounce as submission to Washington’s dictates—raises the question: Is Venezuela the blueprint for a similar takeover of Cuba?

A Late-Night Phone Call

In the early morning hours of January 3, 2026, shortly after Maduro’s abduction, Marco Rubio called then-Vice President Delcy Rodríguez. Speaking in Spanish, according to several people familiar with the events who spoke to the *New York Times*, he presented her with a clear choice: cooperate with the U.S.—or face further attacks on Venezuela’s infrastructure, military bases, and senior government officials.

Rodríguez agreed. According to President Trump, she stated that she was prepared to do whatever the U.S. deemed necessary to “make Venezuela great again.” Trump himself announced that the U.S. would “lead” the country until a “safe, orderly, and prudent transfer of power” had taken place. A few days later, he told the *New York Times* in an interview that he expected the U.S. to lead Venezuela for years to come.

Rubio, according to the newspaper, which based its report on more than a dozen conversations with government officials from both sides, has since been the de facto ruler of

the country—without ever having traveled to Caracas in person. Other U.S. officials refer to him internally as the “viceroy,” a reference to the powerful governors of the Spanish colonial empire against whom Venezuela fought for independence in the early 19th century.

The “Pocket Money” Economy: How Washington Controls Venezuela’s Finances

The most striking instrument of U.S. control is financial in nature. The U.S. Treasury Department collects Venezuela’s export revenues—primarily from the oil industry—and channels them back to Caracas via the Venezuelan banking system, subject to strict conditions. Rubio and his team determine what the money may be used for and by whom. The *New York Times* compares this mechanism to parents giving their children an allowance.

Rodríguez relies on these funds to pay government employees and prop up the national currency. While the system does give her the advantage of being able to effectively shield outstanding debts to international creditors under the U.S. Treasury Department’s protective umbrella, the price is complete dependence.

At the same time, Rubio is actively reshaping the Venezuelan oil sector. He has granted U.S. companies preferential access and has increasingly squeezed out European oil companies that were already operating in the country before the U.S. takeover. Venezuela’s state-owned oil company has since quietly taken over the shares held by the Russian state-owned company Rosneft in joint projects.

The oil trade itself is conducted through two trading companies—Trafigura and Vitol—which operate within a structure established by the Trump administration.

Loss of Sovereignty in Practice

The day-to-day reality of Venezuelan governance under U.S. oversight can be seen in specific events documented by the *New York Times* and commented on by Chavista journalist Jessica Dos Santos on the *Venezuelanalysis* website.

Rodríguez submits important personnel decisions—including the appointment of the defense minister—to Rubio for approval. When *Fox News* anchor Bret Baier asked her for an interview, she replied that Trump would have to agree first. Trump reportedly enjoyed this gesture of subservience and has since repeated the anecdote to others on multiple occasions, according to the *New York Times*, citing several people familiar with his remarks.

Particularly revealing is the incident involving Foreign Minister Yván Gil: When the U.S. attacked Iran in the spring of 2026, Gil issued a cautious condemnation of the attack on Venezuela’s longtime ally. The Trump administration had Rodríguez informed that the post must be deleted—and warned against publicly supporting U.S. adversaries. Gil deleted the post a few hours later. Dos Santos views this as an open admission that Venezuela no longer determines its foreign policy independently.

The depth of this subservience is also evident on the security front: In June 2026, intelligence from sources close to the Rodríguez administration helped U.S. forces kill Héctor “Niño” Guerrero, a top leader of the Tren de Aragua gang, in a missile strike in a remote area of southern Venezuela—the first military cooperation between the two countries in decades.

The Venezuelan government initially dismissed reports of U.S. special forces as false; after Trump himself announced the success of the operation, Caracas belatedly acknowledged a “joint operation.”

In February 2026, businessman Alex Saab, a close confidant of Maduro, was also arrested under pressure from Washington and extradited to the U.S.—after his Venezuelan passport had been revoked. U.S. authorities hope Saab will provide testimony that could strengthen the criminal case against the imprisoned Maduro.

Disaster Capitalism: The Earthquake as an Instrument of Power

On June 24, 2026, two severe earthquakes [shook](#) Venezuela. Entire neighborhoods were destroyed, and more than 5,000 people lost their lives. According to the *New York Times*, Rubio was informed of the situation in the middle of the night while in Bahrain and immediately called Rodríguez to pledge the full support of the U.S. Two days later, American rescue teams were on the ground.

Since then, 900 U.S. military personnel have been [deployed](#) to Venezuela; the Israeli army [is also on the ground](#) and hopes that this aid will help restart relations with Tel Aviv.

The U.S. has pledged nearly \$400 million in aid and delivered cash to the Venezuelan government. Under the guise of humanitarian aid, U.S. forces have taken control of the port of La Guaira and the “Simón Bolívar” International Airport, as Dos Santos describes in *Venezuelanalysis*. U.S. soldiers are stationed in the air traffic control tower, surveillance drones are circling over Caracas, and military helicopters are patrolling the disaster areas.

This pattern corresponds precisely to what Canadian journalist and critic of capitalism Naomi Klein described as “disaster capitalism” in her 2007 book **The Shock Doctrine**: A disaster is followed by a brief period of disorientation, then a window of political opportunity—and ultimately a shift in power that cannot be reversed.

Klein emphasized that crises are not necessarily planned, but they are systematically exploited.

Rubio himself admitted that the earthquake had set back his stated goal of restoring democracy to Venezuela. But for the actual strategic goal—securing Venezuela’s oil for U.S. interests—the disaster has deepened rather than weakened control.

Oil First

For years, Rubio has portrayed himself as a champion of democracy in Latin America. In Venezuela, he is now backing a transitional government drawn from Maduro's inner circle. The *New York Times* reports that most Venezuelans initially greeted Maduro's ouster with relief—only to watch in disbelief as Washington formed an alliance with his key enforcers.

The controversial far-right opposition politician María Corina Machado—who, just months earlier, had been [elevated to a figure on the international stage](#) with the Nobel Peace Prize—was deliberately sidelined by Rubio. He fears that her return to Venezuela could spark unrest that would deter U.S. oil investors.

It is unclear when elections will take place. When asked by the *New York Times* in May 2026, Rodríguez replied, "I don't know. Someday." Political observers suspect she is trying to sit out the remainder of Trump's term, hoping his successor will ease the pressure. But the decision is not hers to make—it lies with Rubio.

Trump himself has stated on several occasions, half in jest, that Venezuela could become the 51st state of the U.S.

A Blueprint for Cuba?

What is being tested in Venezuela could serve as a model for the regime change in Cuba being pushed by the Trump administration—without a formal occupation, but with comparable structural control.

Cuba has been mired in a deep economic and energy crisis for years, which has been massively exacerbated since January by a U.S. energy blockade. The U.S. sanctions, which have been in place for more than 60 years, were thus taken to the extreme: U.S. President Donald Trump had threatened punitive tariffs against any country that continued to supply oil to Cuba. Ships that Cuba had chartered on the world market were intercepted by the U.S. Coast Guard.

As a result, only a single oil tanker has arrived in Cuba since the beginning of the year. On May 1, Trump finally threatened, via executive order, to impose sanctions on foreign companies operating in key sectors of the Cuban economy. Numerous Western firms have subsequently withdrawn, while investors close to Trump have already [secured](#) the mining rights to the country's most important mines. Trump [has repeatedly threatened](#) that he would "take over" the country.

The Venezuela model shows how Washington could use this leverage: a sanctions and licensing regime that grants access to certain actors and denies it to others; control over foreign exchange flows that drives a government into existential dependence; and humanitarian or security crises that serve as a pretext for a military presence.

The crucial difference: In Venezuela, it was the violent abduction of a head of state that abruptly tipped the balance. In Cuba, Washington is currently attempting to achieve its goals through creeping erosion caused by an energy crisis and a deliberately engineered humanitarian crisis.

Unlike in Venezuela, where Delcy Rodríguez—a sitting vice president—became an administrator at Washington’s mercy overnight, Cuba’s key figure is not in the presidential palace but within the revolution’s innermost family circle.

Raúl Guillermo Rodríguez Castro—grandson of Raúl Castro, known in Havana as “Raulito” and on the streets as “El Cangrejo” (“the Crab”)—has emerged since January as one of the most influential figures in Cuba’s power structure.

The colonel in the Ministry of the Interior and longtime bodyguard to his grandfather is openly positioning himself as Cuba’s negotiator with Trump. “I can negotiate with anyone the U.S. designates,” [he declared](#) confidently in a recent interview with *USA Today*. Observers view Washington’s deliberate decision not to impose sanctions on him as a signal.

In the interview with the newspaper, he explained that he had helped forge the necessary consensus for the ongoing [far-reaching economic reforms](#). For Rubio’s circle, which demands not only economic but also political change, however, this is not enough.

Moreover, the Cuban leadership stands united behind him. After some voices reacted with outrage that a man without an official position or party role could speak for the government, Prime Minister Manuel Marrero Cruz rejected any suggestion of internal discord and pointed to Raúl Castro’s directive. The Communist Party went even further and [formally confirmed](#) Rodríguez Castro as part of the official negotiating team.

So no new “Delcy” for Rubio, who is slowly running out of options in the face of ever-new and more detailed sanctions, while Havana continues to show resistance.

This is likely one reason why Washington wants to leave no doubt that the military option remains on the table: According to a recent *CBS* [report](#), preparations for airstrikes are already underway, though no decision has been made yet. Rubio [announced](#) that he would use “all available means.” ([Cubaheute](#))