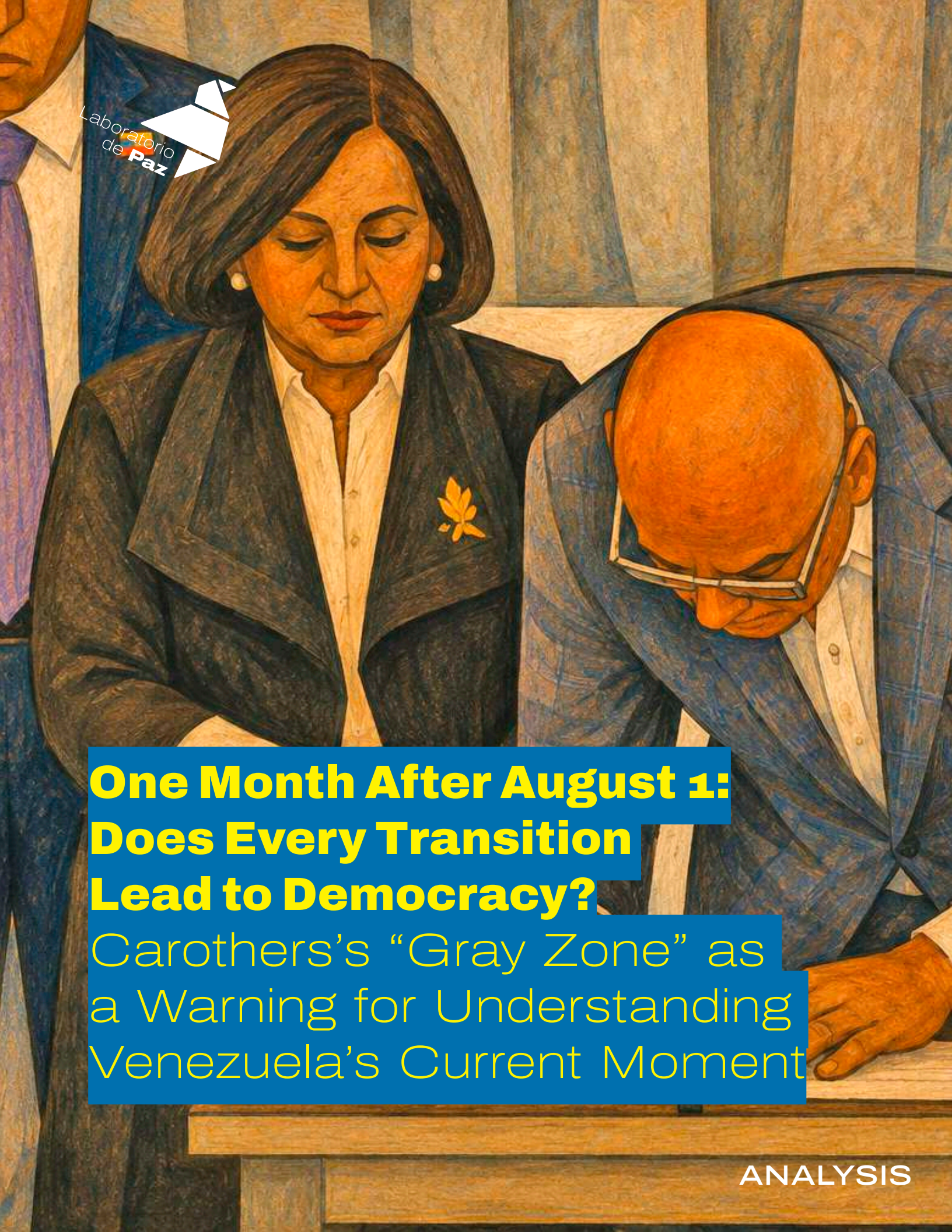
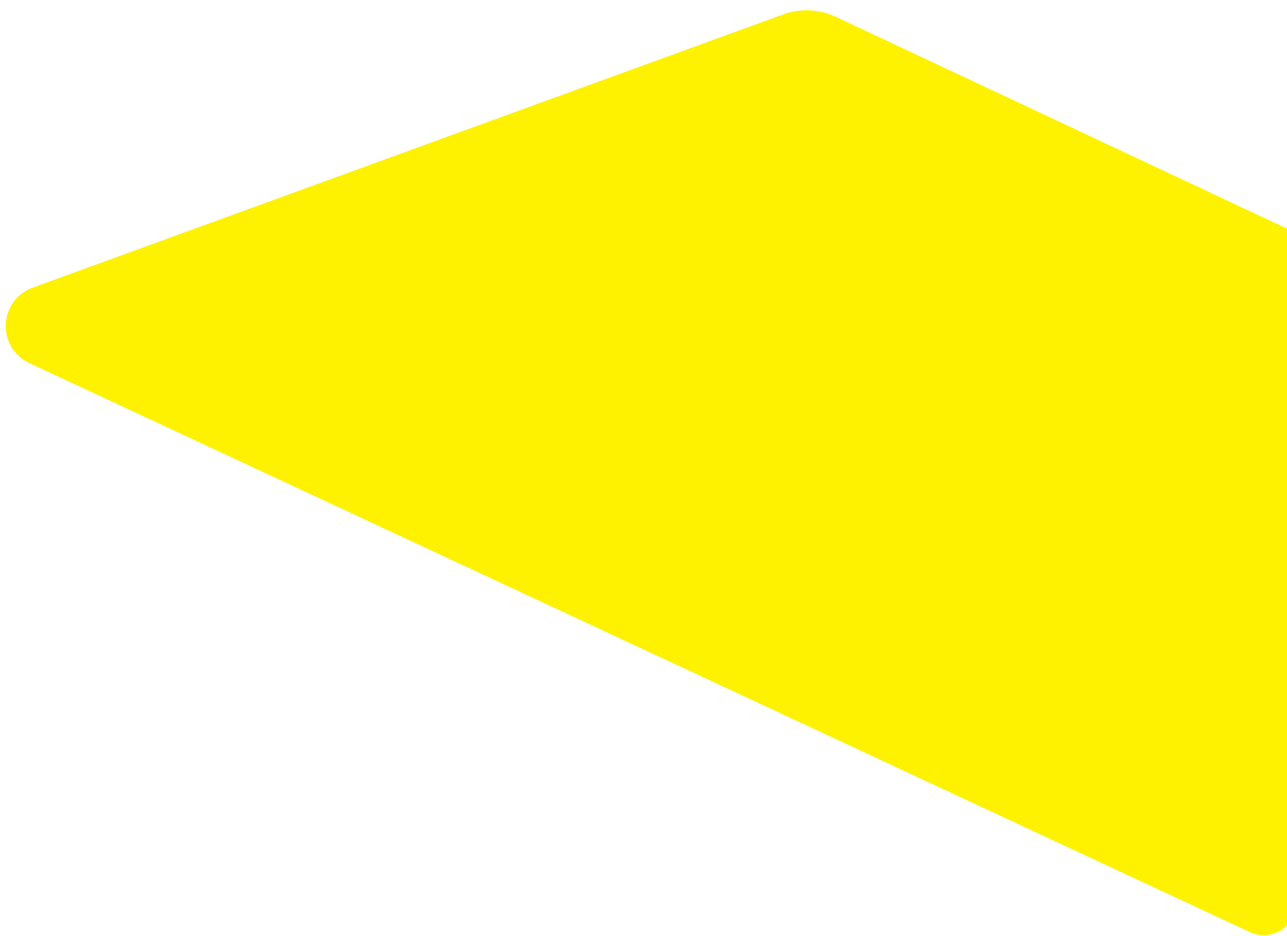




One Month After August 1: Does Every Transition Lead to Democracy?

Carothers's "Gray Zone" as
a Warning for Understanding
Venezuela's Current Moment





CONTENTS

- Introduction (5)
- Methodological Note (6)
- 1. One Month of Dialogue: What Has Happened? (7)
- 2. Venezuela After January 3: A Transition—Toward What? (8)
 - a) A Crisis of Political Legitimacy That Remains Unresolved
 - b) Conditioned Political Sovereignty
 - c) A Social Emergency Aggravated by the Earthquake
 - d) A Real but Limited and Reversible Political Opening
- 3. Why “How Is the Transition Going?” Is the Wrong Question (10)
- 4. The Gray Zone: A Possible Threshold (11)
 - a) Warning 1: Feckless Pluralism
 - b) Warning 2: Dominant-Power Politics
 - c) The Venezuela of 2027 We Want to Avoid
- 5. What Kind of Political Order Is the Dialogue Producing? (14)
 - 5.1. The Tension Revealed by the Release of Political Prisoners
- 6. One Negotiation, Several Levels (15)

- 7. The Risk of Delegating the Transition (16)
- 8. Making the Most of the Opening (17)
 - 8.1. Rebuilding Trust
 - 8.2. Rebuilding Organizational Capacity
 - 8.3. Building an Agenda of Our Own
 - 8.4. Four Dimensions That Must Advance Simultaneously
- 9. Five Questions for This Moment (23)
- 10. Five Readings to Continue the Discussion (24)



INTRODUCTION

One month after the start of the so-called “dialogue roundtable,” expectations about its possible outcomes are beginning to build. The renewal of the Supreme Court of Justice (TSJ) and the National Electoral Council (CNE) are among the main ones. Recent releases from detention, greater tolerance for certain forms of critical expression, and the existence of spaces for negotiation have also fueled the perception that Venezuela may have entered a process of transition.

For **Laboratorio de Paz**, these changes matter, and every opportunity that could lead to restoring the Constitution and rebuilding democratic institutions must be seized. Precisely for that reason, the process needs debate and public scrutiny that can help strengthen it.

We are concerned that, in some sectors, the idea has taken hold that asking questions about the direction, timing, or characteristics of the process could weaken it. “The complexity of a transition” and the “need to give it time” sometimes appear less as arguments than as ways of silencing or postponing public debate.

In exercising the right to participate in public affairs, recognized in Articles 62, 70, and 5 of the Constitution, we begin from one premise: if the outcome of the current dialogue process cannot be taken for granted, asking questions, putting forward proposals, and making recommendations are ways of influencing it and pushing its boundaries.

A democratic society is not built by suspending debate until the final outcome is known. It requires public scrutiny, deliberation, social organization, and the capacity to identify risks early on. Asking who decides, under what rules, with what oversight, and where certain reforms are leading does not weaken a potential democratic transition. It can help prevent it from being diverted, stalled, or ultimately producing outcomes different from those expected.

A segment of public opinion appears to assume that a transition began after January 3 and that, although slow, complex, and imperfect, it will inevitably lead to democracy. The framework announced by the United States—stabilization, recovery, and transition—has reinforced that expectation and, with it, a degree of certainty that this sequence will ultimately be fulfilled.

However, more than twenty years ago, Thomas Carothers warned of the risks of understanding processes of political change in this way. Based on his research on the subject, he concluded that a country can begin moving away from authoritarianism without necessarily transitioning toward democracy. Between these two poles, the evidence suggests, lies a broad “gray zone” in which different combinations of political opening, elections, pluralism, institutional weakness, and concentration of power can remain stable for years. This warning is useful for Venezuela.

This document does not seek to offer definitive answers about a process that is still unfolding. It seeks to identify trends, point out risks, and contribute elements to a discussion that needs to take place now, while there is still an opportunity to influence its outcomes.

The central question will be: what kind of political order are the agreements, reforms, and concessions emerging around the 2026 dialogue roundtable producing? Finally, we will propose several lines of action for civil society and human rights defenders.

Methodological Note

This analysis assumes that, in the short and medium term, the fundamental features of the current relationship between the United States government and Venezuela’s de facto authorities will remain in place.

This is a variable that may change. Among other factors, the results of the November 2026 U.S. congressional elections could alter Washington’s incentives, capabilities, or priorities toward Venezuela. A significant change in that relationship would require revisiting some of the hypotheses presented in this document.

We will not explore here the possible scenarios arising from that election. It is enough to note that the relationship between Washington and Miraflores should not be regarded as a permanent condition, but rather as one of the variables shaping this process.

1) ONE MONTH OF DIALOGUE: WHAT HAS HAPPENED?

Although the process began politically on August 1 with the announcement of the talks and an initial contact between the parties, the first in-person meeting of the so-called “dialogue roundtable” took place in Caracas on August 6, 2026. The delegations are headed by Jorge Rodríguez, representing the government of Delcy Rodríguez, and Dinorah Figuera, representing a sector of the opposition linked to the National Assembly elected in 2015. The mechanism has received support and backing from the United States. María Corina Machado and Edmundo González Urrutia are not directly participating in the talks.

At its opening session, the parties agreed on a working methodology and general principles: good-faith negotiation; the pursuit of a political, peaceful, democratic, and constitutional solution; mutual recognition and respect; political equality and equal treatment at the negotiating table; verifiable compliance with commitments; and the protection of human and political rights. The announced issues included addressing the consequences of the earthquake, the reinstitutionalization of the Supreme Court of Justice (TSJ), the reconstitution of the National Electoral Council (CNE), and guarantees for the exercise of political and civil rights.

The first round of talks, held between August 6 and 12, produced two public agreements. The first was to move forward with the replacement of all TSJ justices through a new nomination process, as well as with reforms related to the justice system. The second was to jointly pursue the recovery of Venezuela’s international reserve assets held at the Bank of England, with the stated purpose of using them to address the consequences of the earthquake and other social needs, under transparency mechanisms.

Other key issues remain unresolved. These include the renewal of the CNE, effective guarantees for political and civil rights, and the definition of electoral conditions and an electoral calendar. Nor has the full release of persons detained for political reasons been incorporated as a central demand of the dialogue roundtable, an issue we will examine later.

The process has opened channels for consultation with some sectors of society, but the core negotiating sessions have been held with restricted access, and public information about their deliberations remains limited. This makes it difficult to know precisely the positions, disagreements, concessions, and monitoring mechanisms within the negotiations.

One month later, the dialogue roundtable is not starting from scratch: it has produced agreements and generated expectations that must be acknowledged. But its most important outcomes are still taking shape. This is therefore an appropriate moment to ask not only what agreements it is producing, but also what kind of institutional framework and power relations may emerge from them.

2. VENEZUELA AFTER JANUARY 3: A TRANSITION—TOWARD WHAT?

Venezuela changed after January 3. What we still do not know is the ultimate direction of that change.

To understand the current moment, it is useful to recognize four overlapping dimensions.

a) A Crisis of Political Legitimacy That Remains Unresolved

The Venezuelan conflict did not begin on January 3, 2026. Its immediate antecedent lies in the presidential election of July 28, 2024, and in the authorities' inability to demonstrate, through disaggregated and verifiable results, the victory they attributed to Nicolás Maduro. The subsequent repression of protests and persecution of political and social actors deepened the crisis of legitimacy.

The capture of Nicolás Maduro on January 3 radically changed the situation, but it did not resolve that underlying problem. Delcy Rodríguez currently exercises power without having been elected President and on the basis of a controversial constitutional interpretation regarding Maduro's absence. Her effective capacity to govern, administer the State, and negotiate with other governments does not, in itself, resolve the democratic legitimacy deficit. This situation was further aggravated after the 180 days established by the Constitution as the maximum duration of a provisional or interim government had elapsed.

b) Conditioned Political Sovereignty

The events of January 3 introduced another exceptional feature: the United States acquired an extraordinary capacity to influence Venezuelan political decisions.

The relationship between the White House and Miraflores has since become one of the central variables in the conflict. Economic, political, and institutional decisions depend, to varying degrees, on incentives, pressures, and agreements between the two governments.

This situation of extraordinary external influence has been described as “tutelage.” International involvement can make a decisive contribution to creating conditions for democratization. However, tutelage can also alter the incentives of domestic actors. When the perception spreads that fundamental decisions will be made from outside the country, the pressure to build the domestic capacities needed to promote and sustain those decisions diminishes.

c) A Social Emergency Aggravated by the Earthquake

The political debate is also taking place in a society that has been battered for years by a Complex Humanitarian Emergency, the deterioration of public services, impoverishment, and mass migration.

The two earthquakes of June 24 added a new emergency and placed reconstruction at the center of the national agenda. This is not an issue separate from democratization. The management of reconstruction resources, the awarding of contracts, the definition of priorities, oversight mechanisms, transparency of information, and community participation are also issues related to the distribution of power.

Reconstruction can strengthen transparent institutions, decentralization, and citizen participation. It can also reinforce clientelist relationships, economic concentration, and dependence on the State. Reconstruction and democratization must therefore be understood as parallel processes.

d) A Real but Limited and Reversible Political Opening

It would be a mistake to analyze Venezuela today as though nothing had changed. There are signs of an opening that must be acknowledged and seized. People have been released from detention, there is greater space for certain forms of critical expression, and opportunities for dialogue have emerged where they were previously closed.

It is therefore useful to distinguish among three concepts: opening is not the same as liberalization, and liberalization is not necessarily democratization.

A society can regain certain spaces for expression, organization, and negotiation without the structural conditions that prevent effective democratic competition having yet changed

That is precisely why we need to look beyond the snapshot of the present moment.

3. WHY “HOW IS THE TRANSITION GOING?” IS THE WRONG QUESTION

In 2002, Thomas Carothers published *The End of the Transition Paradigm*. His critique targeted an idea that had acquired enormous influence after the so-called democratic “third wave”: the assumption that when a country began moving away from dictatorship, it was entering, almost mechanically and automatically, a transition toward democracy.

The paradigm envisioned, with different nuances, the following sequence: opening → breakthrough → democratic consolidation

Actual experience proved more complicated. Many countries began processes of liberalization, held elections, allowed political opposition, adopted institutional reforms, and expanded certain freedoms without becoming functioning democracies.

Carothers called the broad space between outright dictatorship and democracy the “gray zone.” Within it, opposition parties, independent civil society, elections, and formally democratic institutions can coexist with serious deficits in representation, participation, the rule of law, electoral legitimacy, and institutional functioning.

His fundamental warning has become increasingly relevant over the years: moving away from authoritarianism does not necessarily mean moving toward democracy.

Carothers specifically challenged the idea that opening, breakthrough, and consolidation constituted a predictable sequence. Experience showed gradual processes, reversals, sideways shifts, and institutional changes that did not follow a predetermined script. He therefore proposed replacing the question “How is the democratic transition going?” with a more open-ended one: “What is happening politically?”

For Venezuela, more than twenty years later, Carothers’s warnings should be taken into account. Saying that a transition needs time may be a reasonable observation. It becomes a problem when time ceases to be a variable to analyze and instead becomes an argument for suspending public scrutiny.



Carothers identified two recurring patterns among countries that had partially moved away from authoritarianism without achieving functioning democracies: “feckless pluralism” and “dominant-power politics.”

He did not present them as inevitable outcomes or as categories capable of explaining every case. He described them as relatively stable configurations from which countries do not necessarily emerge easily. For Venezuela, rather than predictions, they can serve as warning signs.

In these systems, pluralism exists: different political forces participate, compete, and may even alternate in power. Yet institutions remain weak, elites remain disconnected from citizens, and the system shows little capacity to respond to their demands.

This warning is particularly relevant to two expected outcomes of the dialogue roundtable: the renewal of the TSJ and the CNE. Both may represent significant advances, but their democratic value will not depend solely on incorporating sectors or individuals who are currently excluded.

A CNE with a more plural composition, for example, would not necessarily be more independent, nor would it by itself guarantee more democratic decisions.

Imagine a renewal in which pro-government and opposition sectors obtain more balanced representation, but fundamental decisions continue to be adopted by simple majority. Under those conditions, a pro-government majority could approve decisions on sensitive aspects of the electoral process without having to reach agreements with the other members of the body. The composition would have become more plural, but not necessarily the ability of that pluralism to influence decisions.

This logic would not be entirely new. The current National Assembly provides an example of how the presence of different political sectors can coexist with a pro-government majority that retains the ability to set the agenda and approve decisions using its numerical advantage. Applied to the CNE, a similar dynamic could produce a body with a more plural composition without sufficiently changing the rules through which power is exercised within it.

The democratic standard must therefore be more demanding: judicial independence, professional qualifications, transparent selection procedures, electoral impartiality, accountability, and the effective ability of institutions to act even against the interests of those who participated in appointing their members.

b) Warning 2: Dominant-Power Politics

The second pattern described by Carothers is different. There is some space for the opposition, some formally democratic institutions function, and elections may be held. But one political force retains such a significant structural advantage that the effective possibility of alternation in power remains limited.

Carothers identifies the blurring of the boundary between the State and the governing political force as a fundamental characteristic of these systems. Public resources, state media, the bureaucracy, the justice system, and coercive capacities ultimately operate for the benefit of those who control power.

A genuine democratic opening should begin to dismantle these conditions, rather than merely expand the boundaries within which the dominant power can be challenged.

Greater freedom of expression matters. Greater opportunities for organization matter. Institutional renewal matters. Elections matter. But none of these measures, considered in isolation, guarantees that structural power relations have changed.

This is one of the risks that the Venezuelan debate should anticipate: a system can become more open, tolerate greater criticism, and incorporate new actors without eliminating the conditions that allow one sector to retain decisive advantages.

c) The Venezuela of 2027 We Want to Avoid

Imagine for a moment that it is August 2027.

Venezuela is a considerably more open country than it was two years earlier. There are fewer political prisoners; media outlets and organizations that previously faced enormous difficulties are able to operate; opposition sectors occupy institutional positions; and the National Electoral Council has been renewed. There is also a new Supreme Court of Justice with justices linked to different political sectors.

From the outside, the picture shows clear progress. However, the new CNE was constituted according to a quota-based logic. Its members are primarily responsive to the sectors that promoted their appointments, and important decisions continue to be made under rules that allow a majority to impose its position. This new CNE has called local elections, disregarding the demand that the next elections be presidential. The TSJ reproduces a similar dynamic. There is greater pluralism, but institutional independence remains precarious.

The National Assembly is also pluralistic, but the pro-government majority retains sufficient power to impose the agenda and unilaterally approve significant decisions. Social organizations have greater freedom to operate, although they continue to have little capacity to influence major national decisions.

These would be features of feckless pluralism: more actors participate, but institutions continue to function primarily through negotiations and power balances among elites, with citizens only weakly connected to the spaces where decisions are made.

At the same time, the fundamental structures of dominant power remain in place.

The ruling political sector continues to control a large share of State resources and retains structural advantages over its competitors. There has not been sufficient separation between party, government, and State. Electoral conditions have improved, but the playing field remains tilted. The opening makes it possible to compete more effectively than before, without yet guaranteeing an equal opportunity to contest for power.

Meanwhile, post-earthquake reconstruction has mobilized enormous resources and generated economic recovery, but without sufficient mechanisms for transparency, decentralization, and citizen oversight. The recovery improves living conditions for sectors of the population and may increase political stability without necessarily changing power relations.

The United States considers that the process has produced sufficient stability and progress to continue its relationship with Miraflores. The opening of the Venezuelan economy to free markets and foreign investment is presented to the world as evidence of success. External pressure diminishes.

And Venezuelan society, after waiting for months for the main transformations to emerge from negotiations among Washington, Miraflores, and political elites, reaches 2027 with virtually the same organizational weaknesses with which it entered the opening.

Venezuela would then be a more open, more pluralistic, and possibly more stable country than it was in 2026. But it would still be far from qualifying as a democracy.

That is the gray zone this document seeks to help Venezuela avoid.

5. WHAT KIND OF POLITICAL ORDER IS THE DIALOGUE PRODUCING?

The dialogue roundtable must be evaluated by its concrete results, but also by something less obvious: which power relations those results actually change.

If the TSJ and the CNE are renewed, it will not be enough to count how many representatives close to each sector were appointed. It will be necessary to assess whether the mechanisms used effectively increase their autonomy and institutional strength.

If opportunities for political participation increase, we will need to examine who can use them, under what conditions, and with what guarantees.

If further releases from detention take place, their enormous importance for those released and their families must be acknowledged, without losing sight of the fact that arbitrary deprivation of liberty remains a human rights violation that creates obligations for the State. Moreover, if the criminal proceedings against them remain open, a message discouraging citizen participation persists.

5.1. THE TENSION REVEALED BY THE RELEASE OF POLITICAL PRISONERS

Opposition representatives linked to the dialogue roundtable have publicly stated that they have not included the release of political prisoners among their demands in order to avoid their “instrumentalization.” From a human rights perspective, there is a fundamental problem with this argument: the release of an arbitrarily detained person is not a political concession. It is an obligation of the State. Demanding that release does not turn the victim into an instrument of negotiation.

The recent releases also introduce another relevant element for understanding the actual architecture of the process. Politically significant decisions can result from talks between the Venezuelan authorities and the U.S. government, while certain issues remain outside the agenda of the Venezuelan dialogue roundtable.

This reality raises an additional question: Where, in fact, is the center of gravity of the negotiation?

6. ONE NEGOTIATION, SEVERAL LEVELS

The dynamics that have developed since January 3 reveal at least two levels of negotiation.

One is visible and Venezuelan: the so-called dialogue roundtable. The other takes place in the relationship between Miraflores and Washington and has the capacity to influence fundamental decisions.

The existence of different channels of negotiation is not necessarily negative or exceptional in conflict-resolution processes. However, their coexistence has consequences for participation and accountability.

When the most far-reaching decisions can be made in a bilateral setting with little transparency, the Venezuelan dialogue roundtable—whose opposition representatives can be subjected to public scrutiny—does not necessarily hold decision-making power over the fundamental issues of the conflict.

This may place it in a subsidiary position relative to a primary negotiation about which citizens have even less information and capacity to exert influence. From a democratic perspective, it is important for society to be able to know the rules, understand the objectives, evaluate the results, and exercise some capacity to influence decisions that affect its future.

7. THE RISK OF DELEGATING THE TRANSITION

The United States' ability to influence the Venezuelan authorities has generated understandable expectations.

After years of institutional closure and repression, the fact that an actor with leverage can achieve results that domestic actors had been unable to obtain is perceived as an opportunity.

But this expectation can also produce an unintended effect: the progressive delegation of political initiative.

When the perception spreads that an external actor has the capacity to bring about fundamental changes, domestic incentives to organize and demand those changes diminish. Political actors, social organizations, professional associations, and citizens may begin to wait for external signals before acting; moderate their demands so as not to interfere with negotiations about which they know little; postpone debates because “this is not yet the time”; or assume that certain reforms will inevitably result from agreements between Washington and Miraflores. Tutelage can therefore become a mechanism of self-restraint.

This risk is not an argument against international involvement. The United States can make a decisive contribution to creating favorable conditions for democratization. The challenge is to prevent that capacity from progressively replacing the initiative of Venezuelan society. The stronger the perception that an external actor can produce change on its own, the weaker the domestic incentives to organize and demand it may become.

8. MAKING THE MOST OF THE OPENING

A predictable response to these warnings is to ask civil society to “participate more.” But this alone is ineffective and insufficient.

After years of repression, migration, fragmentation, impoverishment, and the closing of civic space, the opening finds a society weakened in its capacity for collective action. Making the most of the opening should therefore also mean rebuilding social capacity.

We propose working simultaneously along four mutually reinforcing dimensions: rebuilding trust, rebuilding organizational capacity, building an agenda of our own, and exerting influence.

8.1. Rebuilding Trust

Trust is often taken for granted in political analysis. Agreements, alliances, coordination, common agendas, and shared strategies are discussed as though the actors expected to build them already had relationships solid enough to do so. Today, that is not necessarily the case.

Years of authoritarianism have also produced distrust. Repression generates fear; surveillance generates suspicion; polarization turns differences into accusations; competition for scarce resources damages relationships; exile separates experiences; and different strategies for dealing with those in power can turn former allies into adversaries.

Distrust is not merely an emotional problem. It reduces a society’s political capacity. When sufficient trust does not exist, information circulates less freely, difficult conversations are avoided, differences are more likely to be interpreted with hostility, and undertaking joint initiatives becomes far more costly.

It therefore seems unrealistic to bring together actors who distrust one another and immediately ask them to develop a common strategy, a program, or long-term commitments. Trust also requires deliberate action.

To translate this idea into concrete practices, we suggest several possibilities:

a) Create Spaces to Come Together Again

Rebuilding trust can begin in spaces whose initial purpose is not to produce political agreements. Cultural activities and gatherings around books, film, music, photography, memory, local heritage, sports, religious traditions, or community reconstruction can allow people who have stopped speaking to one another, or who belong to different sectors, to once again share the same space without the immediate pressure of reaching a common position.

The point is not to hide political differences behind culture. It is to first rebuild the experience of being together.

An exhibition, a film discussion, a publishing fair, a gathering focused on local memory, a small concert, a sporting activity, or an initiative to restore a community space may seem like minor actions compared with the scale of the Venezuelan conflict. Yet they can serve an essential democratic function: restoring ties where politics has broken them.

b) Restore Conversation Before Seeking Consensus

Another practice is to create small spaces for conversation whose initial purpose is not to reach agreements.

Gatherings of eight, ten, or fifteen people, with basic rules of confidentiality and respect, can allow social actors to explain how they interpret the political moment, what they fear, where their limits lie, and what they expect from others.

The first goal should not be to draft a joint statement. It should be to make it possible to say what one thinks without destroying the relationship.

Listening does not imply agreement either. Democratic trust does not require eliminating disagreement, but rather demonstrating that disagreement can exist without automatically turning the other person into an enemy, traitor, or accomplice.

c) Cooperate First Where Possible

Small forms of cooperation can also be attempted.

There is no need to begin with the issues that generate the greatest division. Two organizations that differ over political strategy can, for example, collaborate on a cultural activity, jointly document a community problem, organize a training session, support victims, defend a public space, or share information about a particular human rights situation. These are limited experiences, but they make it possible to establish something fundamental: whether the other party follows through.

Trust is also built through accumulated evidence. An agreed activity that is actually carried out, information shared responsibly, a small commitment fulfilled, or a disagreement handled without rupture can generate more trust than signing grand declarations of unity.

Coming together again, talking, cooperating, and attempting more ambitious agreements can occur at different speeds and, when circumstances require it, simultaneously.

d) Reconnect the Country with Its Diaspora

There is another divide that requires deliberate attention: the relationship between those who remain in Venezuela and those who are outside the country.

Migration and exile have created different political experiences. Those who remain in the country face risks, restrictions, and everyday needs that may not be sufficiently understood from abroad. Those outside the country may have greater freedom to speak out, denounce abuses, mobilize resources, or establish international relationships, but they may also experience a degree of distance from domestic dynamics.

These different experiences have generated prejudices in both directions. From inside the country, those abroad may be perceived as disconnected from reality, demanding actions whose costs they themselves will not have to bear. From abroad, the caution, adaptation, or engagement with authorities of those who remain in Venezuela may be interpreted as conformism, co-optation, or surrender.

These simplifications weaken a relationship that should be a source of strength. The relationship between the diaspora and actors on the ground needs to shift from competition over representation toward complementarity of capacities.

This can also be built through concrete practices: regular conversations between organizations inside and outside the country; projects with differentiated responsibilities according to each actor's possibilities; secure mechanisms for sharing information; spaces where those on the ground can define what international support they need; and agreements about when the diaspora can amplify reports of abuses without unnecessarily increasing the risks faced by those who remain inside the country.

Not everyone can do the same things precisely because not everyone faces the same conditions.

e) Building Trust Also Means Setting Boundaries

Rebuilding trust does not mean that every organization must become an ally. It is possible to engage in dialogue without cooperating, to cooperate on specific initiatives without sharing a strategy, and to build alliances only with those with whom there is a sufficient degree of common ground.

Recognizing these different degrees of engagement can even reduce distrust. Much of that distrust arises when it is unclear what each actor expects from the other.

Trust increases when expectations are realistic, boundaries are known, and commitments can actually be fulfilled. We do not need to trust in everything in order to begin trusting in something.

8.2. Rebuilding Organizational Capacity

Rebuilt trust must gradually translate into organizational capacity. Democracy requires strong public institutions, but it also requires a society capable of organizing interests, managing conflicts, and exerting pressure on those who govern.

Years of authoritarianism have weakened precisely those capacities. Every space recovered during the opening should therefore be used not only to carry out a specific activity, but also to leave behind greater organizational capacity once that activity is over.

An assembly can serve to bring in new members. A campaign can train new spokespersons. A community activity can create a permanent network. A professional gathering can help reactivate a professional association. A university initiative can rebuild student representation. A labor demand can become an opportunity to strengthen a trade union.

The measure of success should not be only how many people participated today, but what capacity remains in place for tomorrow. This means rebuilding existing organizations, but also allowing new ones to emerge.

Trade unions, professional associations, business associations, neighborhood organizations, student movements, victims' organizations, cultural collectives, parent associations, community organizations, and independent media are all part of the social infrastructure of a democracy.

Strengthening them means rebuilding membership, renewing leadership, improving internal decision-making mechanisms, training new generations, decentralizing responsibilities, and rebuilding territorial networks.

It also means defending their autonomy. An organized society should not become an extension of the government, the opposition, an embassy, or international cooperation agencies. It can engage and cooperate with all of them while retaining its own capacity to define its priorities.

An opening that does not strengthen society can close again while leaving virtually intact the balance of power that existed before it.

8.3. Building an Agenda of Our Own

An independent social agenda should not depend exclusively on the priorities of those at the negotiating table. Building such an agenda is strengthened by relationships of trust and organizations capable of acting.

Venezuelan society should not limit itself to reacting to the issues introduced by the government, the opposition, the United States, or the dialogue roundtable. It needs to identify its own priorities.

Nor does this require beginning with an attempt to produce a grand, consensual national program. It can be built from the bottom up. Trade unions can identify the conditions necessary to restore labor rights and freedom of association. Universities can formulate proposals on autonomy and educational reconstruction. Community organizations can establish priorities for post-earthquake reconstruction. Victims and human rights organizations can define the guarantees needed for truth, justice, reparation, and non-recurrence. Professional associations can develop proposals for rebuilding institutional capacity.

These sectoral agendas can subsequently begin to converge. Shared democratic minimums can emerge from areas of agreement: guarantees for political participation, freedom of association and expression, judicial independence, genuine elections, transparency, accountability, the demilitarization of public life, and mechanisms to prevent the concentration of power from occurring again.

An agenda of its own also makes it possible to change society's relationship with the dialogue roundtable. Society stops asking only what those negotiating are willing to concede and begins to establish what outcomes it considers necessary.

This is particularly important given the risk of tutelage. U.S. involvement can open opportunities and create incentives that did not previously exist. But a society with an agenda of its own is better positioned to take advantage of those opportunities without delegating the definition of its future to Washington.

8.4. Four Dimensions That Must Advance Simultaneously

Rebuilding trust, strengthening organizational capacities, building an agenda of our own, and exerting influence are not successive stages. They are dimensions that need to advance simultaneously and reinforce one another.

Venezuela's political timetable will hardly allow us to wait until one task has been completed before beginning the next. There will be moments when it will be necessary to exert influence even without sufficiently strengthened organizations; to build agreements among actors who still deeply distrust one another; or to seize a political opportunity while the priorities of a common agenda are still being discussed.

Rather than a sequence, the goal is to build a virtuous circle of democratic capacities.

This also means accepting different paces. Not all organizations or sectors start from the same place. Some have pre-existing relationships that allow them to move quickly toward joint initiatives. Others will need to begin simply by re-establishing contact. Forcing artificial unity can be just as counterproductive as abandoning any possibility of cooperation.

The challenge is to move forward simultaneously with whatever each actor is able to do, without turning differences in pace, strategy, or location—inside or outside the country—into new causes of paralysis or rupture.

The political opening may expand, stall, or reverse before these capacities have been rebuilt. The point, therefore, is not to prepare first and act later. Capacity-building must take place while action is underway.

Rebuilding trust, strengthening organizations, building an agenda, and exerting influence are, in themselves, ways of making democratic use of the opening.





9. FIVE QUESTIONS FOR THIS MOMENT

We do not have definitive answers to these tensions.

But a society that waits until it knows all the answers before organizing to influence them may find that it is already too late.

Asking questions does not weaken a process of democratization. It forces the process to make its objectives explicit, makes it possible to detect deviations early, and helps build the capacities needed to influence its direction.

We therefore propose five questions that should guide the public evaluation of the process over the coming months:

a) Are the Reforms Redistributing Power or Merely Dividing It Up?

Bringing new actors into institutions that were previously monopolized can represent progress. The democratic standard, however, must be their independence from all political sectors.

b) Will the New Institutions Be Able to Act Independently of Those Who Participated in Their Appointment?

The true test of a new TSJ or a new CNE will not be merely its composition, but its ability to make decisions that run counter to the interests of any of the actors who made its appointment possible.

c) Is the Opening Increasing Venezuelan Society's Autonomous Capacity to Organize?

A democratic transition requires more than agreements among elites. It requires organized citizens capable of participating, making demands, exercising oversight, and sustaining the institutions that are built.

d) Where Are the Fundamental Decisions About the Country's Political Future Being Made?

The coexistence of the Venezuelan dialogue roundtable and the Washington–Miraflores channel requires us to examine which of these two spaces has the effective capacity to produce decisions, and how much Venezuelans can know about and influence those decisions.

e) Are We Using This Opening to Build the Capacities That Will Make Possible a Democracy That Does Not Permanently Depend on External Tutelage?

This may be the question that encompasses all the others. More than twenty years ago, Carothers recommended that we stop looking at countries beginning to move away from authoritarianism and automatically asking how their democratic transition was progressing. A more open-ended question was preferable: what was happening politically?

That recommendation remains entirely relevant today. Venezuela has changed. Opportunities exist that did not exist until recently, and it would be a mistake to waste them. But it would also be a mistake to assume that these changes are inevitably moving in a democratic direction.

We are at a moment of questions because we are still in a time of possibilities. Failing to ask questions does not strengthen the process. It can weaken us in the face of its possible outcomes.

Democracy will not be solely the result of what those currently negotiating agree upon. It will also depend on the capacities that Venezuelan society manages to rebuild while those negotiations are taking place.

10. FIVE READINGS TO CONTINUE THE DISCUSSION

This document takes as its starting point Thomas Carothers's essay *The End of the Transition Paradigm*, originally published in 2002. Carothers challenged the idea that countries moving away from authoritarianism necessarily follow a sequence toward democracy and proposed examining the specific political configurations that can emerge within that "gray zone."

For those interested in exploring the discussion in greater depth, we suggest including five QR codes in the final version:

Thomas Carothers: *The End of the Transition Paradigm* (2002)

Challenges the idea that every country beginning to move away from authoritarianism is necessarily transitioning toward democracy.



David J. Myers and Jennifer L. McCoy: *Venezuela in the Gray Zone: From Feckless Pluralism to Dominant Power System* (2003)

More than twenty years later, this text is particularly thought-provoking given the possibility that Venezuela may once again develop a political configuration located within this “gray zone.”



Guillermo O'Donnell: *Delegative Democracy* (1994)

O'Donnell warns that the existence of elections does not, by itself, guarantee strong institutions, checks on power, or a high-quality democracy.



Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way: *Elections Without Democracy: The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism* (2002)

Develops the concept of competitive authoritarianism: systems in which democratic institutions and meaningful political competition exist, but those in power violate the rules to such an extent that the regime fails to meet the minimum standards of democracy.



Alejandro Monsiváis Carrillo: *Hybrid Regimes? Democracy, Autocratization, and Regimes with Adjectives* (2025)

A Latin American update of the debate surrounding the “gray zone” between democracy and authoritarianism. Monsiváis warns of the risks of grouping very different political experiences under the label of “hybrid regimes” and proposes more precise tools for distinguishing among them. His analysis serves as a reminder that it is not enough to say that a country is “between” authoritarianism and democracy: we must identify which institutions, rights, and power relations are changing, and in what direction.



