

World

Trump administration tells prosecutors to avoid criminal probes of acting Venezuelan president

No immediate comment from Delcy Rodríguez

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Venezuela's acting President Delcy Rodríguez is seen waving after bidding farewell to visiting U.S. Energy Secretary Chris Wright at Miraflores Palace in Caracas, Venezuela, in February. (Ariana Cubillos/The Associated Press)

The Trump administration has quietly instructed federal prosecutors in Miami to avoid pursuing criminal investigations into Venezuela's acting President Delcy Rodríguez, a longtime target of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, according to current and former U.S. law enforcement officials — the latest sign of warming relations between the White House and the oil-rich nation.

It's unclear whether prosecutors had implicated Rodríguez in any crimes or whether investigators were moving toward an indictment. A U.S. Justice Department spokesperson said in an email "there was never an investigation into her to shut down."

But DEA records obtained by The Associated Press earlier this year show she consistently surfaced on the radar of federal law enforcement

dating to at least 2018, though she has never been criminally charged in the U.S. like several other senior Venezuelan officials.

The directive to pause scrutiny into Rodríguez was meant to avoid upsetting the administration's efforts to stabilize Venezuela after the capture of her predecessor, Nicolás Maduro, among other reasons, the official said.

It was not clear whether the White House, which deferred comment to the Justice Department, was involved in the decision.

"Everybody has been told to stand down," one of the former officials said.

U.S. pressure on Venezuela hasn't eased, even as world's attention turns to Iran

The former officials, who had been briefed on the development, as well as the current official all spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to publicly discuss internal deliberations.

Rodríguez, a U.S. attorney representing her and the Venezuelan Communications Ministry didn't respond to requests for comment.

Eases pressure on Rodríguez

Removing the threat of potential indictment, even temporarily, eases pressure on Rodríguez as the Trump administration seeks to work with the acting leader to stabilize Venezuela after Maduro's ouster and open the country to U.S. investment.



U.S. President Donald Trump, seen pointing a finger during a cabinet meeting on Wednesday, has praised Rodríguez as a 'terrific person.' (Evan Vucci/Reuters)

U.S. President Donald Trump praised Rodríguez as a "terrific person" shortly after the U.S. military took Maduro and his wife to New York to face federal narcotics charges. Both have pleaded not guilty.

In recent months, the U.S. has lifted sanctions against Rodríguez and recognized her as Venezuela's sole head of state, allowing her to re-establish ties with western banks and more freely work with U.S. investors seeking to tap into the world's largest petroleum reserves.

As ties between the two governments have deepened, some have held out the Venezuelan playbook — characterized by oil blockades, indictments of top leaders and threats of military intervention — as a model to drive regime change from within as the U.S. pressures other longtime adversaries in Iran and Cuba.

U.S., Venezuela re-establish diplomatic ties 2 months after Maduro's capture

Rodríguez and her brother, Jorge Rodríguez, the head of the National Assembly, were hit with U.S. sanctions during Trump's first term for their role in undermining Venezuelan democracy and cementing Maduro's authoritarian rule.

Rodríguez "is doing a great job," Trump wrote on social media in early March. "The Oil is beginning to flow, and the professionalism and dedication between both Countries is a very nice thing to see!"

In recent months, Rodríguez has hosted ceremonies with a steady stream of American oilmen, some of them partaking in high-profile delegations led by U.S. Energy Secretary Chris Wright and Secretary of the Interior Doug Burgum.

Election talk deferred

Missing in all the mutual backslapping is any talk of elections in Venezuela, even as Rodríguez last month blew through a 90-day limit set by Venezuela's high court to fill Maduro's position on a temporary basis.



A U.S. Marine Corps aircraft approaches the U.S. embassy during a military exercise in Caracas last Saturday. (Leonardo Fernandez Vilorio/Reuters)

"I don't know," she responded in English when a visiting U.S. journalist earlier this month shouted out a question about her time frame for holding elections. "Some time."

U.S. Sen. Jeanne Shaheen of New Hampshire, the top Democrat on the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has demanded the administration explain its favourable treatment of Rodríguez, calling her a "central figure in Nicolás Maduro's repressive regime."

"Sanctions have been lifted on Ms. Rodríguez without any indication that she has taken concrete and meaningful actions to restore democratic order," Sheehan, joined by Sen. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, wrote in a letter to U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio and U.S. Secretary of Treasury Scott Bessent last week.

Venezuela's acting president signs law to open oil sector to privatization

Rick de la Torre, a former CIA chief of station in Caracas, said that the decision to halt any criminal investigations into Rodríguez fits well with the Trump administration's foreign policy goals in Venezuela.

"She's a lifelong Marxist and was a senior leader of one of the world's most corrupt regimes, but the U.S. is providing her with breathing space and carrots to lay the foundation for democracy and U.S. investment," said de la Torre, the CEO of Tower Strategy, which advises companies seeking to do business in Venezuela.

"There's a shelf life to her utility, however. At some point she will face justice," he added.

On the DEA's radar

The DEA had amassed a detailed intelligence file on Rodríguez dating to at least 2018, and has received allegations about her ranging from drug trafficking to gold smuggling, the AP reported earlier this year. One confidential informant told the DEA in early 2021 that Rodríguez was using hotels in the Caribbean resort of Isla Margarita "as a front to launder money," the records show.

WATCH | Trump's '51st state' post about Venezuela:



U.S. President Donald Trump posted a map graphic on his Truth Social platform Tuesday depicting Venezuela with an inset American flag and the label '51st State.' Antonio Matheus Suárez, journalist for the Caracas Chronicles, says Venezuelans don't believe Trump's recent comments about acquiring Venezuela pose a 'serious threat.'

Her name has surfaced in nearly a dozen DEA investigations — several of which remained ongoing as recently as this year — involving field offices from Paraguay and Ecuador to Phoenix and New York. She had even been linked to Maduro's alleged bag man, Alex Saab, whom U.S. authorities first arrested in 2020 on money-laundering charges, the records show.

Rodríguez deported Saab this month as part of a purge of insider businessmen who are accused of having enriched themselves through corrupt dealings with Maduro.

Venezuela 'untenable situation' that had to be addressed, Rubio says about Maduro capture

It's unclear in which Miami investigations Rodríguez's name surfaced. Two of the former officials said Rodríguez has also come up in meetings with investigators in Tampa tasked last year by Pam Bondi, former U.S. attorney general, with looking into financial crimes in Venezuela.

At the time, Rodríguez was serving as Maduro's vice president. Justice Department policy requires the attorney general to personally approve the charging of any foreign head of state, who are normally immune from prosecution under international and U.S. law.