

NEGOTIATING A RETURN TO DEMOCRACY IN VENEZUELA

Insights from the participants in the 2019 Oslo-
Barbados Talks

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	<u>3</u>
INTRODUCTION.....	<u>7</u>
PRIOR ATTEMPTS AT INTERNATIONALLY-BACKED NEGOTIATIONS.....	<u>8</u>
2014: UNASUR and The Vatican.....	<u>9</u>
2016: The Vatican.....	<u>10</u>
2017-18: Dominican Republic.....	<u>12</u>
HISTORY AND TIMELINE OF THE 2019 NEGOTIATIONS IN OSLO AND BARBADOS.....	<u>15</u>
OPPOSITION NEGOTIATORS’ VIEWS ON THE OSLO-BARBADOS TALKS.....	<u>23</u>
Unclear Buy-In from Inside the Broader Coalition.....	<u>24</u>
Trump Administration Was Divided on Talks.....	<u>26</u>
Opposition Negotiators Sought a Solution.....	<u>28</u>
Belief that Maduro was Not Negotiating in Good Faith.....	<u>29</u>
CHAVISTA NEGOTIATORS’ VIEWS ON OSLO- BARBADOS TALKS.....	<u>29</u>
Multiple Oppositions in Venezuela.....	<u>30</u>
Rejection of ‘Council of State’ Proposal and Emphasis on Political Future.....	<u>32</u>
Sanctions Relief as Condition for “Free and Fair” Elections.....	<u>33</u>
Belief that Real Negotiations Must Take Place With the U.S.....	<u>34</u>
Maduro Government Claims Commitment to Dialogue.....	<u>34</u>
NEW DYNAMICS IN NEGOTIATIONS.....	<u>35</u>
FULL RECOMMENDATIONS.....	<u>38</u>
ENDNOTES.....	<u>43</u>

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS IN BRIEF

In preparing this report the authors carried out extensive interviews with sources in the Venezuelan opposition and Maduro government, including multiple members of both negotiating teams that participated in the 2019 Oslo-Barbados talks. We also interviewed senior U.S. officials and other international diplomats familiar with the negotiations.

KEY FINDINGS

- **The negotiating teams made progress discussing seemingly intractable problems.** While government negotiators in Oslo and Barbados refused to entertain a proposal for Nicolás Maduro to step down and cede power to a joint “Council of State” to oversee elections, the two sides did discuss the possibility of new presidential elections at length—focusing more on electoral conditions than who occupied the presidential palace.
- **Members of the negotiating teams developed a level of trust and mutual understanding.** While both teams stuck hard to their core positions, they developed enough familiarity with the constraints of their counterparts that they could at times envision more pragmatic solutions to difficult issues.
- **Both negotiating teams contended with hardline factions.** Government sources describe pushback from sectors resistant to concessions. Opposition sources suggested that lack of progress and tepid U.S. support reduced their ability to build buy-in across their coalition.

- **Both the Maduro government and the opposition had alternatives to a negotiated solution, and reverted to them once talks stalled.** The opposition pointed to the failed talks to affirm that more pressure was needed against the Maduro government, and the very act of holding talks burnished the government's legitimacy and international standing. Success in the negotiations was not required by either side.
- **The Maduro government sought to take advantage of opposition divisions to sideline the faction led by Juan Guaidó and empower a faction that was less confrontational.** As talks in Barbados faltered, Maduro entered into parallel dialogue with minority opposition parties, offering only minimal concessions.
- **The United States was perceived by both sides as indispensable to the 2019 negotiations, but divisions between the Trump administration's National Security Council (NSC) and State Department complicated U.S. engagement in the process.** Former officials and opposition negotiators point to clear tensions: State Department diplomats were supportive of the talks, but NSC officials saw them only as a way to deepen Chavista divisions.
- **U.S. unwillingness to match opposition flexibility with regard to sanctions gave it a veto power that was unhelpfully wielded.** The White House's refusal to entertain the idea of sectoral sanctions relief in exchange for new elections while Maduro was still in office, for example, left opposition negotiators with little leverage. New U.S. sanctions, announced in August 2019, presented an excuse for Maduro to stall talks, and for the opposition to declare an end to the process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

With new talks possibly on the horizon, we offer a series of recommendations based on our interviews and analysis. The full set of recommendations is available on [page 38](#). In brief, they are:

- **The negotiating table should be re-structured to incorporate input from a broader set of actors. The next negotiations should have greater gender parity, and include a clear space for consultation with civil society organizations, human rights groups, and victims.** Most interviewees were open to civil society participation in an indirect fashion, believing it could serve to broaden both input to and support for the talks.
- **The Norwegian Foreign Ministry remains the best-regarded actor to facilitate future negotiations.** Moving forward, negotiations may require a more active involvement by facilitators to include proposing creative solutions to roadblocks, and working more freely with participants to encourage paths forward—in concert with other international actors.
- **Publishing the basic agenda of any future negotiations, and updating the public on their progress, can help instill trust in the process—but the talks themselves must be confidential.** Future negotiations should be informed by the failures of previous processes such as the UNASUR-Vatican talks in 2014, the televising of which created perverse incentives for grandstanding and reduced their effectiveness.
- **A roadmap to re-institutionalization, rather than a turning point solution to Venezuela’s crisis, may be more appropriate.** Government sources routinely claim that they are interested in a solution that goes beyond elections and includes guarantees

for political coexistence. Opposition sources describe a new openness to an arrangement in which the two sides agreed to a long term roadmap based on a political accord for rebuilding institutions and trust—with incentives such as gradual sanctions relief attached to each milestone. Both require a more long-term approach.

- **Any solution will ultimately require free and fair elections, but also designing an outcome that allows a secure place for Chavismo in the country’s political landscape.** A viable solution will need to secure a future for this movement while allowing it to define its own leaders and internal dynamics, without the imposition of solutions intended to marginalize or eliminate it.
- **The United States must commit to a negotiated solution to ensure their success.** Both Chavista and opposition sources stressed that to be successful a new round of negotiations would require a U.S. that is not just acceding to talks, or supportive from a respectful distance, but rather materially involved.
- **The U.S. should abandon its “all or nothing” approach to pressure, and make clear that progress on agreed-upon benchmarks can lead to phased relief from sectoral sanctions—which can be snapped back in the event of non-compliance.** Opposition sources close to the Oslo-Barbados negotiations expressed a clear frustration with the previous U.S. administration’s unwillingness to offer sectoral sanctions relief, a key demand of Chavista negotiators, in exchange for anything other than Maduro’s immediate resignation.
- **U.S. policymakers should take care to avoid sending mixed messages.** The State Department-National Security Council divisions that held back the 2019 talks underscore the

importance of coordination among all U.S. political actors in any future process.

- **Supporters of negotiations should offer non-U.S. international actors a chance to play a supportive role in negotiations, as either guarantors or observers.** This may lead to greater buy-in to the process, but care should also be taken to ensure that international actors do not impose their interests on negotiations or send mixed messages.
- **International stakeholders should work to lower the attractiveness of alternatives to credible negotiation—for the government as well as the opposition.** International stakeholders can encourage progress in negotiations by making clear that no alternative to negotiation (normalization of relations with Maduro on one hand, and unconditional and indefinite recognition of Guaidó on the other) is viable.

INTRODUCTION

Venezuela is experiencing an intractable political conflict marked by increasing repression and the dissolution of the country's democratic institutions, leading to a grinding humanitarian and economic crisis. This downward spiral has been punctuated by multiple efforts at negotiation with the help of international actors, but they have been unsuccessful to date. Both the Venezuelan government and the opposition are once again signaling an interest in negotiations, with some support from the new U.S. administration, the European Union, and Latin American governments.

With the prospect of new negotiations on the horizon, the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) and the U.S. Institute of

Peace (USIP) have compiled this report on lessons learned from the most recent talks: the 2019 negotiations in Barbados and Norway. The 2019 process, moderated by diplomats from the Section for Peace and Reconciliation in the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, were the most advanced and credible talks to date, and the team from the Peace and Reconciliation Section of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs remains the best-situated actor to facilitate future negotiations. The goal of this report is to highlight the main lessons learned and subsequent narratives from the 2019 talks, so that policymakers can maximize the potential for success in future efforts.

The paper will provide a brief overview of previous negotiations, assess the history and timeline of the Oslo-Barbados talks in 2019, and present overlaps and disparities in the narratives of members of the two negotiating teams following the failure of the process. In preparing this report the authors carried out in-depth interviews with multiple members of both the opposition and Chavista negotiating teams who participated in the 2019 talks, as well as senior U.S. officials and other international diplomats familiar with the negotiations. All of the interviews were conducted with the understanding that comments would be shared without direct attribution.

PRIOR ATTEMPTS AT INTERNATIONALLY-BACKED NEGOTIATIONS¹

The 2019 negotiations process was the most sophisticated to date. It was the fourth major effort to broker a negotiated solution to Venezuelas' unrest and repression since the beginning of Nicolás Maduro's presidency in 2013. Forming the backdrop for the 2019 process were three previous efforts: the 2014 talks brokered by

the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), the 2016 Vatican process, and the 2017-18 negotiations in the Dominican Republic.

2014: UNASUR and The Vatican

The first experience with dialogue during the Maduro era came in the midst of an extended wave of protests from February to April of 2014. The “La Salida” (which translates as both “the solution” and “the exit”) protest movement responded to frustration at the consolidation of the government of Nicolás Maduro, continued economic deterioration, and violence against protestors by the state security forces. After more than forty deaths, an effort at dialogue was sponsored by the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and the Vatican. It was attended by the foreign ministers of Colombia, Ecuador, and Brazil as well as then-Vatican Nuncio in Caracas Msgr. Aldo Giordani. The initiative began after a visit to Venezuela by the foreign ministers of UNASUR countries which led to a statement that noted “a willingness to dialogue from all sectors.”²

The process was launched with a nationally-televised session in Miraflores with the UNASUR and Vatican sponsors present, but not intervening. Each side was represented by eleven leaders.³ The session opened with Msgr. Giordani reading a letter sent by Pope Francis urging respect and tolerance, and calling for political leaders to become “builders of peace.”⁴ The meeting turned into a six-hour, structured debate, which was at times surprisingly candid and direct but very unfocused, and which finished at 2:00am.⁵ This eventually led to the designation of three working groups, including a “truth commission” to clarify the violence that occurred in 2014, a commission to look at the issue of amnesty for political prisoners, and another commission to explore the relationship between regional and national political authorities.

However, the dialogue broke down after a month with no concrete

results. On May 13, the Secretary General of the Democratic Unity Table (MUD)—as the opposition coalition was then called—Ramón Guillermo Avelledo gave a press conference saying that “the dialogue is in crisis” and that the opposition would not meet again until the government gave a “concrete demonstration” of willingness to make progress. This was a reaction to continued repression against student protesters as well as apparent government renegeing on preliminary agreements. Another likely cause of the MUD’s announcement was mounting criticism stemming from reports that the opposition had asked the U.S. State Department not to pursue sanctions at that time. For many opposition activists, one of the driving motivations of the protest movement had been to push foreign governments to take action against what they saw as a repressive dictatorship. Thus, the possibility that opposition leadership might have negotiated behind the scenes to prevent U.S. sanctions only reinforced hardliners’ distrust of them.⁶

Perhaps most notable about this dialogue effort was the relative passivity of the mediators. The UNASUR and Vatican representatives essentially acted as “accompaniment,” encouraging the process but without any substantial intervention. The process was not designed to break through the two sides’ ideological positions to discuss concrete interests, much less serve as a mediation process that could rework their objectives to the point that they were no longer mutually exclusive.

2016: The Vatican

2016 was marked by the opposition’s push to organize a presidential recall referendum and the Maduro-controlled National Electoral Council’s efforts to impede it. During the entire year there were suggestions of dialogue and calls for Vatican involvement from both sides.⁷ After regional courts invalidated the signature-gathering for a recall referendum against Maduro in mid-October and the CNE



Pope Francis welcomes Nicolás Maduro at the Vatican, 2013. Andreas Solaro, AP Images.

suspended the procedure, there were protests and calls for a massive march on the presidential palace, with a high likelihood of violence.⁸ The sides met on October 23 and then again on November 11-12 in negotiation in which the Vatican squarely placed its reputation and political capital on the line as guarantors of the process. On November 12 the sides jointly released a five-point agreement: regularizing the situation of the National Assembly and naming new rectors to the National Electoral Council, defense of the Essequibo region from territorial claims of neighboring Guyana, mutual recognition and coexistence, and the inclusion of governors and civil society in continued dialogue.

Over the following months, however, the process deteriorated as a lack of clarity over the requirements for a normalization of the status of the National Assembly allowed the Maduro government to repeatedly change its demands.⁹ On December 1, Vatican Secretary of State Pietro Parolín sent a letter to both sides as well as the

other mediators saying the Vatican “fulfilling its role as guarantor of the seriousness and sincerity of the negotiations” would only continue if four demands were met. However, the four demands he listed included two that were part of the November agreement—addressing the economic crisis and restoring the constitutional role of the National Assembly—and two more very important ones that were not: setting an electoral calendar and releasing political prisoners.¹⁰ The letter angered the government, especially hardliner Diosdado Cabello.¹¹ On January 20, 2017, Vatican representatives met Maduro at Miraflores and presented a document in an attempt to restart dialogue, with little success.¹² Vatican representative Claudio María Celli returned to Rome shortly thereafter, signaling the symbolic end of the Vatican’s involvement.

These negotiations amounted to a significantly more robust engagement on the part of the Vatican and actually produced an agreement. The Vatican also acted as a guarantor of the agreement. When the stipulations of that deal were not fulfilled, they refused to participate further. Indeed, when Nicolás Maduro reached out to Pope Francis to ask him to get involved in 2019, he responded by pointing out that there had not been “concrete gestures to fulfill what was agreed upon.”¹³ However, there was a certain level of inexperience in the Vatican approach as the agreement was vague in details, which effectively allowed the Maduro government to repeatedly move the goal posts on regularization of the National Assembly. The Vatican then unilaterally imposed significant new demands as conditions to continue its involvement, understandably irritating the Maduro government.

2017-18: Dominican Republic

In December 2017, with the government announcing elections for the first half of 2018 and the opposition already announcing they would not participate, there was another effort at political

negotiations. This time international actors played an even more active role, proposing an initial agreement that served as a guide to the discussion.

The Dominican Republic talks were also unique in that they saw greater opposition efforts to include civil society. Opposition negotiators created an “advisory group” of civil society representatives, including a handful of academics, a representative of the Federation of Chambers of Commerce (FEDECAMARAS), a member of the UNETE union confederation, and one NGO representative, Feliciano Reyna of the humanitarian group Acción Solidaria.¹⁴ These individuals provided technical assistance only to the opposition delegation on economic, social, and humanitarian issues, but did not engage with the Maduro government’s negotiators and were not directly involved in the negotiations themselves.

The talks were hosted in the Dominican Republic under President Danilo Medina, and Spain’s ex-president Rodríguez Zapatero played an important role as facilitator. They started with an agenda agreement on the six points that would be discussed.¹⁵ In mid-December, after two rounds of talks, mediators announced there had been advances but that more meetings were necessary. Dominican President Medina even mentioned that a final agreement might be signed in January.¹⁶

However, the Maduro government took several actions that muddied the waters. On December 20, the National Constituent Assembly decreed a new law to limit the ability of opposition parties that had previously participated in boycotts to take part in future elections.¹⁷ A January 23 call by the National Constituent Assembly (ANC) for early presidential elections to be held in April made matters worse. On February 6 the government unilaterally presented a document entitled the “Accord for Democratic Coexistence in Venezuela.”¹⁸ Jorge Rodríguez said the opposition had agreed to signing this text without modifications in principle, and after a meeting that lasted

several hours, he publicly and unilaterally signed the document around midnight on February 6. Rodríguez then accused the opposition of following U.S. orders not to sign.



Opposition negotiator Enrique Márquez sits alongside his colleagues before taking part in negotiations in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, 2017. Tatiana Fernández, AP Images.

The opposition presented its counterproposal to the public the next day.¹⁹ There were significant differences between it and the government's proposal, especially on electoral conditions and institutions. Whereas the government offered generalities about electoral guarantees, the opposition document required electoral authorities to ensure that all of the constitutionally mandated checks would be in place for the presidential election. The government document contained some ambiguous language around a UN electoral mission. But the opposition document confusingly obliged the government to send a letter of invitation for a robust UN electoral observation mission in no more than 48 hours after signing, and specified that the electoral campaign would not start until this mission

was in place, despite the fact that the UN does not provide anything beyond technical expertise in electoral processes. It also contained clearer language related to lifting bans on participation against opposition leaders. While both documents agreed on naming two new rectors to the National Electoral Council (CNE) by consensus, the opposition document committed the government (through the Supreme Court) to doing so in no more than 48 hours. There were no efforts to reconcile the two proposed documents through point-by-point methodical negotiations of precise language. Rather, each side sought simply to defend its own proposal as worthy of prevailing. The government was not willing to sign the opposition's version and did not attend the February 7 sessions.

Compared to the two previous efforts, the Dominican Republic negotiation was distinguished by the degree of international involvement, as well as the detailed discussion of a well-developed proposal. Yet, neither side appeared willing or capable of negotiating a single document. Furthermore, the very public nature of the participation—while the sessions themselves were held behind closed doors, all of the participants frequently made disjointed and contradictory declarations before and after—created a media spectacle and did not provide a confidential space.

HISTORY AND TIMELINE OF THE 2019 NEGOTIATIONS IN OSLO AND BARBADOS

After the failure of the Dominican Republic talks, the Maduro government kept the Maduro-dominated CNE and the pro-government Constituent Assembly in place. The government organized presidential elections in May 2018 in what was widely seen as the least free and fair electoral process in years.²⁰ Thus, when

Maduro assumed a new term as president on January 10, 2019, multiple countries made clear that they did not believe he possessed a democratic mandate. On January 23 the president of the National Assembly, Juan Guaidó, announced that he would be assuming a mandate as “interim president,” and was almost immediately recognized by the United States, most of Europe, and most of Latin America.

The initial Guaidó push appeared at the time to be primarily geared at encouraging a sufficient portion of the military leadership to rise up and overthrow Maduro. This, of course, did not happen and European and Latin American countries began to engage the opposition and its backers in Washington to advance credible negotiations regarding the organization of new presidential elections. On February 7, a group of European and Latin American leaders met in Montevideo, Uruguay to discuss ways to facilitate such negotiations. Out of this meeting emerged the International Contact Group on Venezuela, made up of representatives of the European Union as a bloc as well as several European countries (France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom) and several countries in Latin America. Bolivia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Uruguay were original members, and while Bolivia withdrew in 2020, Chile, the Dominican Republic, Panama, and Argentina have since joined). As the Contact Group laid out in its Terms of Reference,²¹ its objective is “not to be a mediator,” but instead to “build trust and create the necessary conditions for a credible process to emerge, in line with the relevant provisions of the Venezuelan Constitution.” Essentially, the Contact Group was formed to create an international environment that was more favorable to negotiations.

Around this time and in parallel to these efforts, Norwegian diplomats began to meet with members of the opposition and the Maduro government about the prospect of a negotiations process. The Norwegian press has reported that initial conversations began in

Cuba, before they were moved to a secure location in Oslo.²² Initially talks were indirect, with Norwegian diplomats engaging in shuttle diplomacy regarding the basic agenda points, ground rules, and interests of both parties without them having to talk face-to-face.

Norway was uniquely suited to this role, because while its Foreign Ministry made clear that Maduro “lacks democratic legitimacy,”²³ it never recognized Juan Guaidó as interim president. In this way the Norwegian diplomats did not assume a position of neutrality, but aimed to be impartial, and this allowed them to achieve significant access and buy-in from both government and opposition.²⁴ Their experienced diplomats also engaged proactively with the main international supporters of either side of the negotiations in order to obtain their buy-in and endorsement of the process. Furthermore, Norway’s deep trust and close working relationship with Cuba during recent peace negotiations with the FARC and ELN in neighboring Colombia allowed their lead diplomats unique insights into both the Maduro government as well as critical geopolitical dynamics of the region.

Marking a clear distinction with the previous negotiations, these efforts benefited from a confidential exploratory phase which began in late February following the controversial and widely criticized attempt by the opposition and the United States government to forcibly enter trucks filled with humanitarian assistance into Venezuelan territory. Despite the heightened tensions, out of shared respect for the Norwegian facilitators, both sides upheld their commitments to the secrecy of this engagement and did not really make clear preparations for a public phase. However, after the failed April 30th uprising supported by the opposition, the existence of the talks were leaked in early May. As such, the Norwegians were obligated to take on an unexpected role of communicating to the public in Venezuela and abroad only very basic information about the process in the subsequent months.

TIMELINE

2019 CHAVISMO-OPPOSITION NEGOTIATIONS

Jan. 30

European Council approves the creation of the International Contact Group for Venezuela to generate international support for dialogue.

March

The Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution (NOREF) sponsors a meeting of opposition and government leaders on Margarita Island. As a result, the International Federation of the Red Cross is allowed to begin humanitarian operations.

May 16

After one round of face-to-face negotiations, the existence of Norway-brokered talks is first leaked to international media.

May 25-30

Another round of talks occurs in Oslo. While no final agreement is reached, opposition and Chavista representatives agree to continue negotiating.

July 11

Talks are moved to Barbados. Norway's team announces that "a table has been established that will work in a continuous and efficient manner to reach an agreed-upon solution," with delegates traveling to and from Caracas for consultation.

August 6

U.S. announces secondary sanctions and National Security Advisor John Bolton issues written remarks to reporters saying "the time for dialogue is over."

August 18

Opposition negotiators travel to Washington for consultations, in part to explore flexibility regarding U.S. sanctions relief. The Trump administration makes clear that sectoral sanctions cannot be eased while Maduro remains in the presidential palace.

September 15

Guaidó issues a statement saying the negotiations process had been definitively "exhausted."

September 17-30

Guaidó representatives cite "Responsibility to Protect" doctrine in the UN General Assembly, and seek greater sanctions and security commitments from European and Latin American allies. The EU adds seven individuals to its sanctions list.

Feb. 7

The International Contact Group is launched by European and Latin American countries in Montevideo, Uruguay.

March-April

The Norwegian Foreign Ministry, which had slowly developed contacts across the political spectrum since 2016, deepens shuttle diplomacy efforts to define a basic agenda and ground rules for talks.

May 17

Norwegian Foreign Ministry announces it "has had preliminary contacts with representatives of the main political actors of Venezuela, as part of an exploratory phase, with the aim of contributing to finding a solution to the situation in the country."

June 29

Venezuelan military counterintelligence agents torture and kill Navy Captain Rafael Acosta, leading Guaidó representatives to skip a planned round of negotiations in Barbados in protest.

Late July

Opposition negotiators present a proposal to create a mixed transitional government to oversee new presidential elections, in exchange for phased sanctions relief in the form of general licenses from the U.S. Treasury.

August 7

The Maduro government announces it will not send representatives to talks scheduled for the next day in Barbados. Both Maduro and Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza describe this as a temporary pause.

September 6

After an interim government official signaled a willingness to abandon Venezuela's historic territorial dispute with Guyana, Maduro preconditions his return to negotiations on Guaidó supporting the country's claim to the contested territory.

September 16

Maduro signs an agreement with a small minority of opposition parties, creating a parallel National Dialogue Roundtable with the opposition that would eventually participate in the December 2020 legislative elections.

The government negotiating team was composed of leading figures of Chavismo: current head of the PSUV-controlled National Assembly Jorge Rodríguez, Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza, and Miranda state Governor Hector Rodríguez. However, important factions within the Maduro government were not represented overtly, including those of the armed forces and Constituent Assembly President Diosdado Cabello. The opposition team was made up of four leaders with broad legitimacy across the coalition: Gerardo Blyde, Stalin González, Fernando Martínez Mottola and Vicente Díaz. More hardline voices within the opposition were, however, not represented in the delegation and largely criticized the engagement as undermining momentum for more drastic options such as military intervention.

A central ground rule was the precept that nothing would be considered final until everything in the agenda was definitively agreed to, in that the implementation of any points of initial consensus could not begin until every last detail of the thorniest issues were finalized.²⁵ The next ground rule was a much more stringent adherence to confidentiality in the process. Opposition and Chavista participants say that the request to avoid publishing detailed information regarding the progress of talks was the preference of opposition negotiators, who feared that the release of this information could fuel skepticism of the talks and embolden some hardline opposition leaders who could spin their existence as a betrayal of the more radical aspirations among their base. The opposition also feared spoiler behavior from hardliners within the Maduro government if they saw the talks as moving towards compromises which would threaten their vital interests. While this ground rule rendered public engagement and contributions to the talks much more difficult, the fact that to this day none of the most sensitive documents, including the agenda itself, have ever been leaked is a reflection of the seriousness with which both sides engaged in the process and their respect for the Norwegian facilitators. The talks were reportedly²⁶ organized around six points that were established at the outset, including: lifting U.S. sanctions;

restoring constitutional order; electoral conditions; the terms of a transition; peace and reconciliation; and post-electoral guarantees. The purported joint objective was the reinstitutionalization and normalization of Venezuela.

In announcing the new sanctions, National Security Advisor John Bolton issued written remarks to reporters claiming “the time for dialogue is over”...This occurred just as the opposition delegation had arrived in Barbados for further talks.

After at least two rounds of face-to-face meetings in mid-to-late May in Oslo, the negotiations were moved to Barbados in order to facilitate travel and communication with principals in Caracas. In Barbados, Norwegian mediators announced on July 11 that the delegates had agreed to “work in a continuous and efficient manner to reach an agreed-upon solution.” Several more rounds of negotiation occurred in the Caribbean island nation over the next three weeks, but the talks hit a wall on August 6 after the U.S. government announced new secondary sanctions that restricted Venezuelan oil sales through Russian, Chinese, and other intermediaries. In announcing the new sanctions, National Security Advisor John Bolton issued written remarks to reporters²⁷ claiming “the time for dialogue is over,” though U.S. diplomats managed to scrub this line from the actual remarks he delivered at a conference in Lima.²⁸ This occurred just as the opposition delegation had arrived in Barbados for further talks. In the previous round they claim to have submitted a proposed draft accord to their counterparts that would allow for free and fair presidential elections under a mixed transitional government in exchange for phased sanctions relief in the form of general licenses from the U.S. Treasury.²⁹

The Maduro government responded swiftly to the new U.S. sanctions. On August 7, Maduro declared³⁰ that he would not be sending representatives to the talks slated for August 8-9. He did not say that he would withdraw from the talks entirely, but instead said he would “review the mechanisms of that process so that its continuation may be truly effective.” This caveat—establishing that the government was skipping the round in protest of sanctions, not abandoning the talks permanently—was publicly reiterated twice by Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza in the following week.³¹³²



Then-U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton talks with U.S. Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross during a conference on Venezuela in Lima, Peru, the day that new sanctions were announced on the Maduro government, 2019. Martin Mejia, AP Images.

In late August, the opposition sent a delegation to Washington to meet with U.S. officials to brief them on the progress of negotiations. The negotiators also sought greater clarity from the Trump administration regarding its flexibility towards a key government

demand: an easing of sectoral sanctions as a precondition for free and fair elections. Around this time an opposition source close to the negotiations suggested to the *Washington Post* that the government had agreed in theory to new elections, but only if sanctions were lifted and elections took place without Maduro's prior resignation. "The government officially accepted going to elections, but in exchange for lifting of sanctions and Maduro staying," the opposition figure said, but "the U.S. doesn't want that."³³ The White House was unreceptive. Opposition figures claim Trump officials did not believe the negotiations could be successful, and remained committed to a policy of trying to create fissures in the government even as talks were ongoing.³⁴

...An opposition source close to the negotiations suggested to *The Washington Post* that the government had agreed in theory to new elections, but only if sanctions were lifted and elections took place without Maduro's prior resignation. "The government officially accepted going to elections, but in exchange for lifting of sanctions and Maduro staying," the opposition figure said, but "the U.S. doesn't want that."

Meanwhile, Maduro pivoted to flatly rejecting the resumption of talks, citing statements by Juan Guaidó's ambassador in the United Kingdom suggesting they give up Venezuela's claim to the disputed Essequibo territory between Venezuela and Guyana.³⁵ Maduro's refusal to participate over the course of six weeks made it difficult for pro-negotiations sectors of the opposition to justify their continued presence at the table. On September 15 Guaidó issued a statement

saying the “Oslo mechanism” undertaken in Barbados had been “exhausted.”³⁶

With the talks officially closed, both parties began to pursue alternative strategies. The Maduro government fell back on its familiar strategy of seeking to divide the opposition by asserting that Guaidó did not represent the plurality of voices and leaders. The day after the definitive end of the negotiations, Maduro signed an agreement with a small minority of opposition parties, creating his own parallel dialogue with leaders who would eventually participate in the December 2020 legislative elections in exchange for minimal electoral conditions and the release of some political prisoners.³⁷ The mainstream opposition, for its part, sought to leverage the end of talks to seek greater pressure from the international community in and around the United Nations General Assembly at the end of September, during which the Colombian government presented a report outlining Venezuela’s alliance with international terrorist groups and referred to post-9/11 Security Council resolutions which were used to justify the invasion of Afghanistan.³⁸ However, reaction from international supporters to this move was underwhelming. The European Union responded by adding seven figures to its list of individual sanctions,³⁹ and the member countries of the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (the “Rio Treaty”) invoked the accord to issue a resolution that expressed interest in applying more pressure but made no binding commitments.⁴⁰

OPPOSITION NEGOTIATORS’ VIEWS ON THE OSLO-BARBADOS TALKS

In the section that follows, we present a synopsis of the main findings from interviews of several opposition sources close to the talks. Participants’ recollections should not be regarded as definitive

or “true” accounts of what happened. Their narratives cannot be decoupled from their political roles and the conflict they are still a part of. However, they are important for a couple of reasons. First, talking directly with participants creates an opportunity to fill in previously undisclosed details and to better understand their perceptions of what happened. And through iterated questioning, multiple explanations are usually forwarded. Interviews can be triangulated with the explanations provided by other interviewees, and facts available from elsewhere. Second, participants’ narratives of a failed negotiation can develop a life of their own and influence future negotiations. As such, they are independent causal factors in their own right and need to be understood.

Ultimately, there are three broad consensus points that emerge from interviews with opposition sources: overall, the talks had unclear levels of support from within the opposition and the U.S. government; opposition negotiators were willing to discuss new elections even if they occurred without Maduro’s resignation; and divisions within the U.S. government undercut the credibility of the opposition delegation in the eyes of the Maduro government which was able to find a relatively low-cost way to back out.

Unclear Buy-In From Inside the Broader Coalition

Our sources described a process that, from the start, was marked by unclear buy-in not only from the U.S. government, but also from some actors in the opposition. One opposition source said a “primary reason” for the failure of the Oslo-Barbados talks was the existence of “weaknesses in internal unity, leading to many internal attacks,” as soon as the talks were announced.

Two interviewees mentioned that more could have been done before the process was made public to generate broad support for

negotiations among the wider opposition coalition. One source mentioned that some actors inside the coalition seemed to be counting on the talks to fail from the beginning, and sought to capitalize on the apparent lack of success to press for alternative measures of pressure.⁴¹

“I think our leadership had negotiations as a last resort, not as a first option. The Trump administration as well as our national leadership were betting on a break inside the government, but it didn’t happen. Obviously the most popular options are options involving ‘quick solutions.’”

-Opposition interviewee

Some of these divisions were made clear in public. Members of the Guaidó coalition have openly suggested that going through negotiations can serve as a way to demonstrate their futility to the international community.⁴² Interviewees noted that negotiations were unpopular among the opposition leadership in early 2019, and only gained momentum due to repeated failures to generate cracks between the armed forces and the Maduro government from January to April. According to one interviewee: “I think our leadership had negotiations as a last resort, not as a first option. The Trump administration as well as our national leadership were betting on a break inside the government, but it didn’t happen. Obviously the most popular options are options involving ‘quick solutions.’”⁴³ Others often argued that negotiations never constituted the true “Plan A” of the opposition, which remained the internal collapse of the Maduro government and the immediate transfer of executive power to Juan Guaidó.

Others in the opposition, who had been more critical of Guaidó, played a role as active spoilers once negotiations were announced. This included María Corina Machado, Antonio Ledezma and Diego Arria, of the Alianza Bravo Pueblo faction. In June 2019, they distributed a public letter to Guaidó⁴⁴ in which they criticized him for entering into negotiations when, as they wrote, “force is the only option.” They also claimed that the talks had an inherently delegitimizing effect on Guaidó, arguing that: “the new dialogue in Norway, endorsed by the criminal corporation headed by Nicolás Maduro and his partners, is inexplicable to the country because it places them in moral parity with the legitimate government that you represent.”

Trump Administration Was Divided on Talks

From the first negotiations between Maduro and Guaidó representatives in Barbados, the opposition perceived internal divisions within the Trump administration regarding the talks. On the one hand, Special Representative for Venezuela Elliott Abrams and professional diplomats in the State Department’s Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs appeared interested in giving the talks space to develop. On the other hand, National Security Advisor John Bolton and the National Security Council (NSC) Senior Director for Western Hemisphere Affairs Mauricio Claver-Carone opposed negotiations, believing they would weaken the pressure campaign and allow Maduro the opportunity to buy time precisely when they believed he was on the verge of succumbing to their pressure campaign. Opposition sources described persistent, months-long divisions between the State Department and NSC as an impediment to their ability to seek U.S. backing for the talks and thus strengthen the credibility of the opposition delegation at the table. These deep tensions were confirmed by former senior U.S. officials. According to one source: “We were quiet, or divided, on whether the negotiations were a good

thing or a bad thing. Did we want them to end or to succeed? It was never clear.”⁴⁵

Opposition sources say this ambivalence within the Trump administration made it difficult to deliver on the main thing they believed Maduro wanted at the negotiating table: sanctions relief, which Maduro representatives said was a necessary precondition for new presidential elections. This was one reason why opposition negotiators traveled to Washington in August 2019—to see how amenable the Trump administration would be to offering at least partial sectoral sanctions relief ahead of elections, rather than insisting on Maduro’s resignation or departure from the country as a necessary precondition for any kind of eased pressure. The response they received was non-committal, thus reaffirming the opposition delegation’s understanding of their own inability to actually deliver on essential elements of negotiations’ agenda.

“We were quiet, or divided, on whether the negotiations were a good thing or a bad thing. Did we want them to end or to succeed? It was never clear.”

-U.S. Government Official

One source described meeting with diplomats in the U.S. State Department, who appeared very interested in the progress of negotiations and the latest details in the process. This contrasted with a separate meeting with NSC staff, who were entirely uninterested in the formal negotiations and instead pressed the delegation to brainstorm ways to encourage high-level defections from the government—something the negotiators saw as unrealistic and fundamentally undermining the trust-building they had painstakingly undertaken with their counterparts. These divisions were made public

at times, such as when Bolton undercut opposition negotiators by issuing remarks to the press that “the time for dialogue is over,” which as noted above was a deviation from the public message of the U.S. State Department.

Opposition Negotiators Sought a Solution

Opposition sources describe their participation in the Oslo-Barbados talks as a serious effort to resolve the crisis. They saw the negotiating team as professional and committed to participating in good faith. Knowing that there was varied buy-in to the negotiations from within the broader opposition, they sought to find workable solutions that would be difficult to dismiss. In consultation with Washington and the leadership of the main four opposition parties in Caracas, negotiators found that different views of the timing of sanctions relief, and of the minimal acceptable electoral conditions, were strong sources of division.

This was difficult to navigate. Some in the opposition, and the U.S. government, were open to the idea of new presidential elections even with Maduro still in the presidential palace—so long as the elections were competitive. However, the Trump administration made clear that this was unacceptable. According to one opposition source: “We knew if we had conditions and an impartial electoral arbiter we would win. But we couldn’t get the State Department on our side. I remember speaking to the U.S. about this and they never accepted; they said they would never lift sanctions with Maduro in power.”

But the opposition did move somewhat from their demand that Maduro immediately resign and allow Guaidó to assume the presidency. In late July, the opposition submitted a proposal to the Maduro government that would require both Maduro and Guaidó to resign, and for new elections to occur under a “Council of State” made up of both opposition and Chavista representatives. This would

eventually become the basis for the State Department’s “Framework for a Peaceful Democratic Transition” presented in March 2020.⁴⁶

Belief that Maduro was Not Negotiating in Good Faith

Finally, while some participants and supporters of the process concluded that the decision to declare the process “exhausted” was a missed opportunity, and that it may have been more advantageous to keep Maduro at the table, many more also questioned whether the Maduro government was ever negotiating in good faith. Some suggested that the fact that the government did not offer a concrete, detailed counterproposal shows that Maduro was never serious about negotiating in the first place. Diosdado Cabello’s incessant verbal criticisms of the process also led to questions about whether the hardliners within the Maduro government would accept what came out of a negotiated process. Furthermore, the emergence of the “Mesita” dialogue mechanism led many to conclude that the Maduro government had actually continued its “divide-and-conquer” strategy and that the negotiations were simply another ploy to gain time towards legislative elections in 2020 and exacerbate pre-existing divisions within the opposition.

CHAVISTA NEGOTIATORS’ VIEWS ON THE OSLO-BARBADOS TALKS

Pro-Maduro sources interviewed for this report present a different view of the Oslo-Barbados talks than their opposition counterparts. Whereas elements of the Guaidó coalition consistently claim that the government backed out of talks first since they never received a formal counterproposal to their proposal for a mixed transitional government, Chavista sources reject this. They emphasize that it

was the opposition that officially declared the negotiations to be “exhausted,” and hold this up as proof that the opposition did not engage in good faith.

In general, they also were more guarded and less willing to present details of the process. As with the opposition sources interviewed for this report, we do not see the narratives presented by Chavista sources as objective, unconstructed accounts of the process. Rather they are the narratives of actors still involved in a political conflict which provide important details and context, and are important in themselves.

Chavista narratives of the 2019 negotiations, in broad strokes, center on the U.S. role in the talks. Interviewees largely place the blame for the negotiations’ failure on a lack of United States commitment to the process. They saw the Trump administration as fundamentally opposed to the negotiations, and claim the U.S. was never interested in their success. Chavista sources also claim that they sought a long-term constitutional solution to the crisis, and say they were in close consultation with Maduro. Like opposition negotiators, they also support a continuing role for the Norwegian government in future negotiations. “I think the methodology of the Norwegians is a respectful method that treats all actors with adequate respect. They engaged with a variety of actors, and I think it is fundamental to continue with this approach,” said one Chavista negotiator.⁴⁷

Multiple Oppositions in Venezuela

Chavista sources close to the talks routinely emphasize that their participation was in close coordination with Nicolás Maduro in Caracas. Multiple pro-government interviewees described this as a relative advantage compared to the opposition. They claim that internal divisions within the opposition impeded their ability to advance at the negotiating table, whereas the government side was better-equipped

to coordinate with ultimate decision-makers. In the words of one: “Every time they had to make a decision they had to reach internal consensus.[...] We only had one boss, which was Nicolás Maduro.”⁴⁸



Venezuelan Vice President Delcy Rodríguez meets with evangelical pastor and politician Javier Bertucci in the Foreign Ministry in Caracas, after Bertucci agreed to participate in talks between minority opposition parties and the Maduro government. September 2019. Ariana Cubillos, AP Images.

While Chavista negotiators complained about the delays caused by a lack of opposition consensus, they simultaneously exploited disunity in the opposition by seeking to nurture a less antagonistic opposition coalition that largely participated in the criticized 2018 presidential elections. This smaller negotiating table (“mesa de negociación”) came to be known by its critics as the “Mesita.” Interviewees described how Maduro announced parallel talks with this minority opposition coalition the day after Guaidó declared the Oslo-Barbados negotiations exhausted, although the talks reportedly began while the Norway-facilitated process was still ongoing.⁴⁹ One official said that Chavista negotiators were asked to keep the existence of this parallel outreach

a secret as long as the talks with Guaidó were ongoing, a condition they claim to have honored. These parallel talks are consistent with strong narratives within the Maduro government that there have always been multiple oppositions within Venezuela and that the Guaidó-led opposition never fully represented all voices, thus making it critical for them to engage on multiple tracks.

Rejection of ‘Council of State’ Proposal and Emphasis on a Political Future

When asked about the Oslo-Barbados talks, or about the prospect of a negotiated solution to Venezuela’s crisis more broadly, Chavista sources emphasize both a “long-term” and a “constitutional” solution. They speak about a solution in terms not only of elections, but of guaranteeing a future for their political movement. Officials, in public and in private, portray themselves as the targets of an aggressive opposition with powerful international allies whose ultimate goal is to eliminate them. Multiple sources consulted for this report, both opposition and pro-government figures, claimed the Chavista negotiating team sought some form of long-term guarantees of political participation for the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) as part of the 2019 negotiations. They felt that this process did not place sufficient attention and interest in this essential issue for them.

Pro-government negotiators also say they insisted at the outset of talks that any kind of solution to the crisis must have a basis in the 1999 Constitution. While opposition sources claim they never received a formal response to their proposal to create a mixed transitional government, Chavistas close to the negotiations say the response was an unequivocal rejection of the plan. They claim to have opposed the “Council of State” because it violated the constitution, but also asserted that it failed to outline credible post-electoral

political, judicial, and economic guarantees for all stakeholders regardless of the outcome. Instead they pointed to constitutional provisions on elections, such as language allowing for a recall referendum as soon as January 2022, but always insisting on relief from sectoral economic sanctions as a precondition.

Sanctions Relief as Condition for “Free and Fair” Elections

All pro-government interviewees expressed the view that the 2019 negotiations failed because the U.S. was unwilling to offer relief from sectoral sanctions on the terms demanded by Maduro, or even proposed by the opposition delegation. Multiple Chavista negotiators say that the Maduro government had insisted that the prior lifting of all financial and oil sanctions was a necessary condition for any new elections. According to one Maduro negotiator:

“What we said is that if there are new elections, we need to see sanctions relief beforehand so those elections occur under fair conditions. If you ask people how they feel about any government they will respond based on their evaluation of their economic performance. We asked them to go to the U.S. government and propose this, but we never got an answer.”⁵⁰

Maduro government leaders often describe “free and fair” elections through this same lens, in that no candidates are forced to run while fundamentally hindered from showing the merits of their governance record due to external factors such as sanctions.

Belief that Real Negotiations Must Take Place With the U.S.

Similarly, Maduro government officials who took part in the Oslo-Barbados talks have developed a subsequent narrative which conflates the actual timeline of the opposition delegation's visit to Washington to request sanctions relief prior to new presidential elections. While secondary sanctions were actually announced prior to this trip in early August, Maduro officials have asserted that these measures were put in place in response to the opposition delegation's in-person meetings in Washington, thus cementing the government's narrative of the futility of negotiating with the opposition.

As such, Maduro government officials came away from the talks emboldened in their previously-held ideological conviction that the solutions to the Venezuelan crisis were not domestic but rather of an international geopolitical nature. Several questioned the utility of truly conceding critical compromises to any actor other than the U.S. government. As one official put it: "The main lesson is that if the U.S. is not involved as a guarantor, or active party on some level, there is no point in even going through the motions of a negotiation."⁵¹

Maduro Government Claims Commitment to Dialogue

The breakdown of the talks, coupled with the announcement of the "Mesita" process geared initially around conditions and rights for 2020 legislative elections, are consistent with the Maduro government's efforts to claim a banner of promoting dialogue as the ultimate solution for the Venezuelan crisis. They also paint the opposition as not being committed to a peaceful solution, but determined to instead rely on military options to obtain what they were unable to achieve at the negotiating table. This claimed sincerity to dialogue is a familiar

refrain of Maduro government officials who consistently cite their willingness to meet with all leaders and factions of the opposition.

Furthermore, prior to the definitive end of the negotiations, in August 2019 the Maduro government claimed publicly that the opposition was involved in preparations to hire private mercenaries to invade Venezuela and arrest Maduro himself. While far-fetched at the time, once further details of the failed “Operation Gedeon,” eventually carried out in May 2020, were revealed the Maduro government insisted on a timeline which showed that while the Oslo-Barbados processes was still advancing Guaidó had already tasked strategic advisors to engage with mercenary outfits willing to undertake military action against the Maduro government.⁵² In response, the Maduro government cemented its own narrative that the Guaidó-led opposition was never sincerely interested in good faith to pursue a suitable political settlement for all Venezuelan stakeholders, but was rather fiercely dedicated to eliminating the Maduro government by force and simply replacing it.

NEW DYNAMICS IN NEGOTIATIONS

Nearly two years after the failure of the Oslo-Barbados negotiations, both opposition and government representatives say they are open to new talks. However, the last two years have seen new and unique dynamics emerge in Venezuela’s political landscape. This will have significant implications for negotiations moving forward.

Several events in 2020 set the stage for the current moment. After the failure of the 2019 talks, the U.S. government published its “Framework for a Peaceful Democratic Transition” which clarified but did not substantially change its position. The Framework provided no promise of relief from oil and financial sanctions until a new executive authority was in place.⁵³ The willingness by some in the opposition to

seek progressive, gradual sanctions relief in exchange for concrete and verifiable electoral conditions, regardless of whether Maduro remained in office during the lead up to the vote, was ignored by the Trump administration. This changed under the Biden administration, and in May 2021 Guaidó explicitly endorsed such a proposal.⁵⁴

Whether the government would entertain the idea of “early” elections (before Maduro’s contested term expires in 2024) is far from certain. One key development since the 2019 talks is the fact that in March 2020 the Justice Department under Trump unsealed indictments against Maduro and 14 other high-level military and political officials for alleged links to “narcoterrorism,” drug trafficking, and corruption.⁵⁵ Some analysts have suggested the decision to indict members of the inner circle, including Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino López, Supreme Court Justice Maikel Moreno and Socialist Party chief Diosdado Cabello, may hinder efforts to raise pressure on Maduro to enter into credible negotiations.⁵⁶

Maduro, for his part, continues to seek a better relationship with the United States. Since the 2020 U.S. presidential election, Maduro has repeatedly expressed hope for direct channels of communication with the Biden administration. In January, soon after Biden’s inauguration, Maduro issued a statement emphasizing that his government was “willing to walk a new path of relations with the Joe Biden government based on mutual respect, dialogue, communication and understanding.”⁵⁷ Several analysts have suggested that normalization, or at least slightly improved relations, with Washington is the government’s main motivation in any negotiations.⁵⁸

Opposition divisions have grown since 2019. These were deepened after members of the interim government met with mercenaries in late 2019 to early 2020⁵⁹ to discuss potential armed operations in Venezuelan territory, with the reported oversight of Guaidó mentor Leopoldo López.⁶⁰ In addition to providing a propaganda victory

to Chavismo, the incident was unpopular among the opposition, and led the Primero Justicia party to issue a public statement condemning those involved.⁶¹ In late 2020 divisions became even more apparent after Primero Justicia member and former presidential candidate Henrique Capriles publicly split from Guaidó in an effort to negotiate improved electoral conditions ahead of legislative elections in December, whereas Guaidó had committed to abstaining from a process seen as rigged. While Capriles managed to get the government to invite the UN to send observers, and to pardon over 100 imprisoned dissidents,⁶² his faction ultimately did not field candidates in the race due to internal pressure, as well as a lack of credible electoral conditions. Since then, however, Capriles has remained in touch with key government contacts and has used this access to encourage “partial” agreements, such as the May 4 naming of a new National Electoral Council with two opposition representatives on the five-person board.⁶³ This emphasis on partial agreements has set Capriles apart from Guaidó, who has criticized this strategy and insisted instead on the need for an “integral agreement.”⁶⁴

Another element that distinguishes the current moment from the political landscape in 2019 is the emergence of a new and diverse civil society coalition seeking to advance negotiations towards a political solution. On February 5, 2021, several representatives of Venezuelan NGOs, academic groups, faith groups, business, and humanitarian workers, and labor unions came together in Caracas to announce a new, non-partisan coalition to push for democratic change in the country: the National Civic Forum (Foro Cívico Nacional).⁶⁵ In its first communique, the coalition issued a wide-ranging ten-point statement. In it, the coalition clearly states that the Foro Cívico does not seek to replace or supplant political actors, but instead sees its role as vital to pressuring political elites to seek a peaceful, democratic solution. The coalition calls for “A National Democratic Agreement,” and has steadily gained momentum throughout 2021. The new non-

government affiliated rectors on the CNE were, in fact, all candidates that were presented by the Foro Cívico.⁶⁶

New negotiations will not be able to simply resume where the Oslo-Barbados process left off. They will have to take into account changed dynamics inside both Chavismo and the opposition, as well as a changed international landscape and a new administration in the U.S. They will also have to incorporate input from new voices, including a more active civil society that is committed to pushing all political actors to advance credible negotiations, as well as to address their demands for justice and accountability.

FULL RECOMMENDATIONS

While opposition and Maduro government negotiators each express a particular narrative about the 2019 talks, the authors identified some convergence and shared understanding. This is especially true on substantive issues, such as electoral conditions or the timeline of sanctions relief. There even appear to be some small areas of consensus. Chief among these is that both Chavista and opposition sources are open to new negotiations. On one hand, Maduro seeks sanctions relief, which will be necessary to try to regain popularity in the event that his coalition will have to compete politically. On the other, the opposition seeks to achieve necessary electoral conditions that maximize their chance of taking power. The parties also agree that the Norwegians are best-positioned to mediate or facilitate further negotiations. They also agree that divisions within the previous U.S. administration contributed to the failure of negotiations in 2019.

Based on our analysis of these interviews, we offer the following assessments and recommendations for future negotiations:

- **The negotiating table should be restructured to incorporate input from a broader set of actors. The next negotiations**

should have greater gender parity and establish a clear space for consultation with civil society organizations, human rights groups, and victims. Most interviewees were open to civil society participation in an indirect fashion, believing it could serve to broaden both input to and support for the talks. The parties themselves will likely push for new actors in other ways, as both Chavista and opposition negotiators feel that the other side's delegation in 2019 was not fully representative. The opposition argues that the military command, as a key power broker, should be given a seat at the table. Government officials claim that minority opposition voices outside the four main parties (Primero Justicia, Voluntad Popular, Un Nuevo Tiempo and Acción Democrática) should be included in any future negotiations.

- **The Norwegian Foreign Ministry remains the best-regarded actor to facilitate future negotiations.** Both opposition and government sources close to the 2019 talks suggested that the Norwegians carried out professional facilitation, and are well suited to advance future talks. However, some thought a more proactive role could be helpful in the future. Moving forward, negotiations may require proposing creative solutions to roadblocks, and working more freely with participants to encourage paths forward—potentially in concert with other supportive international actors.
- **Publishing the basic agenda of any future negotiations, and updating the public on their progress, can help instill trust in the process—but the talks themselves must be confidential.** Participants in the 2019 negotiations agreed at the outset that the content of negotiations would be kept secret, and that nothing was agreed until everything was agreed. This was the preference of opposition negotiators who feared that publishing the negotiation agenda could demoralize their base and be used against them by Maduro. In future negotiations, however,

opposition sources say they believe the basics of an agenda should be made public, in order to reduce suspicion among what is now a very diverse coalition. This has limits however, and future negotiations should be informed by the failures of previous processes such as the UNASUR-Vatican talks in 2014, the televising of which created perverse incentives for grandstanding and reduced their effectiveness.

- **A roadmap to re-institutionalization, rather than a rapid transition, would likely have more success.** Chavista negotiators routinely claim that they are interested in a solution that goes beyond elections and includes guarantees for political coexistence. Some opposition participants in the 2019 talks conceded that the goal of new elections oversimplified the challenge at hand. Instead, they suggested the end goal be better expressed as a re-institutionalization of the country's democratic framework that would lead ultimately to a free and fair election, but meanwhile could allow for flexibility in improving the country's fraught condition by, for example, applying sanctions relief to verifiable negotiated interim objectives. Others within the opposition describe a new openness to an arrangement in which the two sides agree to a long-term roadmap based on a political accord for rebuilding institutions and trust—with incentives such as gradual sanctions relief attached to each milestone.
- **Any solution will entail free and fair elections, but also designing an outcome that allows a secure place for Chavismo in the country's political landscape.** In reviewing past rounds, opposition and Chavista negotiators expressed dismay at the U.S.'s poor understanding of the current position and staying power of Chavismo. From transparent attempts to encourage a palace coup, to a proposal for a council of state that would require their leader to step down, negotiators believed the U.S. underestimated the salience of ideological narratives within

Chavismo and the fear that is now a part of the movement. A viable solution will need to secure a future for this movement while allowing it to define its own leaders and internal dynamic, without the imposition of solutions intended to marginalize it in the future.

- **The United States must commit to negotiations to ensure their success.** All parties agreed that the U.S. is the essential missing player. The United States is the only actor that can help align opposition figures by dispelling unrealistic thinking about a military solution. It is also the only actor that can realistically promise what the Maduro government seeks—an improved international reputation and relief from sanctions. Both Chavista and opposition sources stressed that to be successful a new round of negotiations would require a U.S. that was not just acceding to talks, or supportive from a respectful distance, but rather materially involved.
- **The U.S. should abandon an “all or nothing” approach to pressure, and make clear that progress on agreed-upon benchmarks can lead to phased relief from sectoral sanctions—which can be snapped back in the event of non-compliance.** Opposition sources close to the Oslo and Barbados negotiations expressed a clear frustration with the previous U.S. administration’s unwillingness to offer sectoral sanctions relief, a key demand of Chavista negotiators, in exchange for anything other than Maduro’s immediate resignation. There was strong support among opposition negotiators for greater flexibility in the U.S. sanctions program on Venezuela, and for a policy that can be more nimble in response to events on the ground.
- **U.S. policymakers should take care to avoid sending mixed messages.** Participants in the 2019 talks, both opposition and Chavista, agree that divisions between the Trump administration’s

National Security Council and State Department were a major impediment to progress. Opposition figures complained of receiving contradictory signals from U.S. officials during consultations in Washington, which they believe created a low-cost way for Maduro to effectively abandon credible negotiations. Chavista sources point to U.S. divisions as evidence that Washington had no intention of encouraging a negotiated solution all along. This dynamic underscores the importance of coordination among U.S. political actors in any future talks.

- **International stakeholders other than the United States should play a supportive role, as either guarantors or observers.**

Several interviewees remarked that while the United States is key to the success of any future negotiations, other players may have a relevant part in advancing a solution. This may lead to greater buy-in to the process, but care should be taken to ensure that international actors do not impose their geopolitical interests on negotiations. The European Union, which was involved in previous attempts at negotiations in 2020, will likely be able to play a supportive role, as will most of Venezuela's Latin American neighbors. Some interviewees suggested Maduro allies such as Russia, China, or Cuba could be observers or guarantors.

- **International stakeholders should work to lower the attractiveness of alternatives to credible negotiations—for the government as well as the opposition.** At present, both parties have clear alternatives to negotiation. Some within Chavismo believe they can wait out international pressure with only token concessions while pursuing normalization in the long term. Some within the opposition believe the status quo, in which they are indefinitely recognized as a legitimate government with access to frozen funds abroad, is more appealing than the result of any negotiation. International stakeholders can encourage progress by making clear that neither alternative is sustainable.

ENDNOTES

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ABOUT WOLA

The Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) is a leading research and advocacy organization advancing human rights in the Americas. We envision a future where public policies protect human rights and recognize human dignity, and where justice overcomes violence.

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ABOUT THE COVER PHOTO

An opposition supporter holds fabric featuring the colors of the Venezuelan flag before a rally in the Montalban neighborhood of Caracas, Venezuela on January 11, 2020. Source: AP Photo/Matias Delacroix

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