

Venezuela's 2024 Presidential Election

May 1, 2024

On July 28, 2024, Venezuela is scheduled to hold a presidential election, which could be a step toward restoring the country's democracy after a decade of increasingly authoritarian rule. There is widespread concern, however, that the Venezuelan government is creating electoral conditions that do not meet democratic standards, including those it pledged to uphold in the [Barbados Agreement](#) (hereinafter, *the Agreement*) between President Nicolás Maduro and Venezuela's main opposition alliance, the Unitary Platform, signed on October 17, 2023. The Maduro government has violated several of its Barbados Agreement pledges, including [barring](#) María Corina Machado, who won an opposition-run primary with [93%](#) of the vote, from participating in the general election and engaging in increasing repression.

The 118th Congress is closely monitoring Venezuela's electoral process and U.S. policy responses. Some Members [welcomed](#) the Biden Administration's decision to ease sanctions in response to the Barbados Agreement, and others have expressed [support](#) for the Administration's decision to reimpose oil and gas sanctions on Venezuela in response to violations of the Agreement. Some Members have [urged](#) the Administration to impose additional targeted sanctions on those engaged in repression of the opposition and/or [pushed](#) for broader U.S. and international sanctions and law enforcement actions against Maduro, [indicted](#) in 2020, and his allies.

Barbados Agreement and Electoral Context

The Barbados Agreement was the result of over two years of Norway-led negotiations between the Maduro government and the opposition. The final deal included commitments related to the timing and conduct of the election, access to media during the campaign, reform of the country's voter registry, and candidate security. The Maduro government has violated several of the Agreement's key provisions (see **Figure 1**) while minimally satisfying others. The government has followed through on commitments to set an electoral calendar and invite [international observers](#) but has imposed restrictions on the political opposition and created roadblocks to their full participation in the election. On March 5, 2024, the Maduro government [announced](#) the presidential election would occur on July 28, providing the opposition four days to register their candidates and the Venezuelan electorate less than a month to [register to vote](#). The opposition was unable to register its chosen nominee, Machado, due to a January 2024 Venezuelan supreme court ruling that [upheld](#) a June 2023 ruling barring her from running for office for 15 years due to alleged fraud and tax violations. Venezuela's National Electoral Council also [banned](#) some parties from submitting presidential candidates.

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Given Machado's inability to run, she [endorsed](#) Corina Yoris, a philosophy professor, as her substitute. Yoris, however, was [prevented](#) from registering as the *Mesa de la Unidad Democrática* candidate by an alleged glitch on the electoral authority's website; the party later successfully [registered](#) former diplomat Edmundo González.

In addition to restricting the opposition's ability to select its candidates, the Maduro government has continued to limit political and civic activity in Venezuela. It has arrested opposition campaign [staffers](#) and human rights [defenders](#) and [expelled](#) the staff of the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). In April 2024, Venezuela's Maduro-aligned National Assembly gave preliminary [approval](#) to a bill referred to as "the law against fascism" that would ban statements that could be interpreted as advocating for violent political action. Some critics [argue](#) the new law could be used broadly to silence those expressing dissatisfaction with Maduro's government. On April 23, Maduro announced he is prepared to once again [receive](#) the OHCHR in Venezuela.

Figure 1. Selected Barbados Agreement Pledges Violated Since October 2023

	
PLEDGES	VIOLATIONS
Authorization of All Presidential Candidates	Ban of Opposition Candidate Elected in Primary
Authorization of All Political Parties	Ban of Opposition Parties from Candidacy
Security and Freedom of All Candidates	Arrest of Opposition Campaign Staffers
Peaceful and Fair Political Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arrest of Human Rights Defenders • Anti-Fascism Law • Expulsion of UN Human Rights Officials

Sources: Barbados Agreement, Associated Press, El País.

U.S. Policy

U.S. policy in Venezuela aims to [support free and fair elections](#) leading to a return to democracy. For much of the past decade, U.S. policy has sought to achieve those ends through [sanctions](#) and efforts to diplomatically isolate Maduro. The Biden Administration has [supported](#) Maduro-opposition negotiations, however, including those that led to the Barbados Agreement, since the Venezuelan opposition decided to enter the 2024 presidential elections despite the difficult electoral conditions. As part of those efforts to support negotiations and incentivize electoral changes, the Administration has negotiated with Maduro officials; provided relief from U.S. sanctions, including six-month [general licenses](#) allowing transactions with Venezuela's gold and hydrocarbons sectors; engaged in [prisoner swaps](#); and reportedly [urged](#) other countries to push Maduro to comply with the Agreement.

The Administration has partially reversed course in response to Maduro's violations of the Agreement. In January 2024, the Biden Administration [revoked](#) the gold sector general license after Venezuela's supreme court upheld the ban on Machado's candidacy. On April 18, the Administration [did not renew](#) the oil sector general license, [citing](#) the Maduro government's continued "disqualification of candidates and parties" and "harassment and repression" of the opposition and civil society. The Administration has continued to permit companies to seek specific licenses to work in Venezuela that are authorized on a case-by-case basis. In addition to pushing for compliance with the Agreement, including by [supporting](#) the deployment of international observers to accompany the electoral process, it is unclear what further steps the Administration may take to ensure this election is freer and fairer than the [discredited elections held in 2018](#).

Congressional Considerations

In addition to conducting oversight of the Administration's efforts to compel democratic reforms, Congress may consider legislative measures to address the political situation in Venezuela. Congress enacted the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2024 (P.L. 118-47, Division F), which allocates \$50 million for democracy programs in Venezuela but withholds 50% of the assistance until the State Department reports certain elections-related conditions are met. Bills to reauthorize targeted sanctions on individuals who engage in corruption, human rights abuses, and/or antidemocratic actions under the Venezuela Emergency Relief, Democracy Assistance, and Development (VERDAD) Act (P.L. 116-94, Division J), which expired in December 2023, have been ordered to be reported in the House (H.R. 6831) and introduced in the Senate (S. 3363). Congress also could consider other bills to authorize various sanctions (e.g., S. 995, H.R. 5670) or resolutions calling for free and fair elections and supporting Machado (e.g., H.Res. 911, S.Res. 486).

Author Information

Leticia Chacon
Analyst in Foreign Affairs

Clare Ribando Seelke
Specialist in Latin American Affairs

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