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Venezuela: Political Crisis and U.S. Policy

Over the past several Congresses, Members have expressed concerns about authoritarian governance under Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro (2013-present). Maduro took office after garnering a narrow electoral victory following the death of Hugo Chávez (in office 1999-2013), founder of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela. Maduro has remained in power following elections in 2018 and 2024 that were both considered fraudulent by international observers, the United States, and most U.S.-aligned democracies. After the July 28, 2024, election, Maduro claimed victory even though precinct-level vote tabulations comprising more than 80% of votes cast indicated that opposition candidate Edmundo González Urrutia won with 67% of the vote.

On January 10, 2025, Maduro began a third term. Neither the economic pressure of the first Trump Administration nor limited sanctions relief and negotiation efforts by the Biden Administration facilitated a return to democracy. Maduro retained the support of Venezuelan security forces, illicit actors, and allies such as China, Cuba, Iran, and Russia.

The 119th Congress may assess U.S. policies, including support for the Venezuelan opposition and the efficacy of sanctions, while considering U.S. energy and migration control interests. Opposition leader María Corina Machado (who was barred from running in 2024) has urged President Trump to end licenses that have allowed companies to operate in Venezuela's energy sector. The Department of the Treasury revoked U.S. oil company Chevron's license in early March 2025; Maduro then paused flights of Venezuelans removed from the United States. It is unclear how the Trump Administration's reported termination of some humanitarian and democracy assistance programs in Venezuela may affect the country's population and democratic opposition.

Political Situation

Venezuela, which the nongovernmental organization Freedom House ranked as "partly free" under President Chávez, has deteriorated to "not free" under Maduro. Chávez, a charismatic politician, benefited from high oil prices and won most elections by a large majority. In contrast, Maduro has experienced narrow wins and some electoral defeats (including in the 2015 legislative elections, in which his party lost control for the first time since 1999). The opposition, once weak and divided, has remained united since 2022 as the Unitary Platform (PUD).

Maduro has relied on security forces and corrupt influence over the courts to quash dissent. He has allowed security forces to enrich themselves through illicit gold mining, drug trafficking, and extortion. The International Criminal Court is investigating alleged crimes against humanity committed by Venezuelan security forces since at least 2017.

Security forces have detained and reportedly abused Maduro's opponents, including dissidents in the military, opposition politicians, and protesters, particularly since the 2024 elections. As of March 10, 2025, the government held 1,014 political prisoners, according to Venezuelan human rights group *Foro Penal*. After Venezuela's attorney general issued an arrest warrant for González, he fled into exile in September 2024. González visited several countries in January 2025 and met with then-President Biden in Washington, DC, but could not return to Venezuela. Machado, who remains in Venezuela, led protests on January 9 but then returned to hiding.

Economic and Humanitarian Crisis

By most accounts, Maduro's government has mismanaged the economy and engaged in widespread corruption. Between 2014 and 2021, Venezuela's economy contracted by 80%, according to estimates by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), due to low global oil prices and the country's declining oil production. According to a 2021 Government Accountability Office report, sanctions imposed by the United States from 2017 to 2019, particularly those targeting Venezuela's oil industry, contributed to the country's economic crisis. Hyperinflation declined from 337% in 2023 to 59.6% in 2024, according to the IMF, but income levels remain insufficient for most households to purchase basic necessities. According to one national survey by a Venezuelan university, roughly 82.8% of the population of 26.5 million lived in income poverty in 2023, particularly outside the capital of Caracas.

In 2024, an estimated 7.6 million Venezuelans (28% of the population) required humanitarian assistance, according to the United Nations. Many households lack reliable access to potable water, and interruptions in electrical service and gas supplies persist. Health indicators, particularly infant and maternal mortality rates, remain poor.

As of December 2024, UN agencies estimated there were some 7.9 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants globally. Some 6.7 million of these individuals reside in other Latin American and Caribbean countries. Venezuelan refugees and migrants reportedly face obstacles to keeping jobs and accessing health care; they may be vulnerable to human trafficking and other abuses. These factors have contributed to secondary migration to the United States.

U.S. Policy

The U.S. government ceased recognizing Maduro as Venezuela's legitimate president in January 2019 and recognizes the democratically elected, opposition-controlled 2015 National Assembly as "the only legitimate branch of the Government of Venezuela," even though most of its members are in exile. From January 2019 through its dissolution in December 2022, the 2015 National Assembly backed an interim government led by its

former speaker, Juan Guaidó. The Guaidó government received recognition from the United States and nearly 60 governments but never exerted power in Venezuela. In November 2024, the U.S. government recognized Edmundo González as president-elect.

Successive U.S. Administrations have employed various strategies to address human rights abuses and autocracy in Venezuela. The first Trump Administration sought to promote democracy in Venezuela through assistance to the interim government, diplomacy, and a “maximum pressure” sanctions strategy to try to compel Maduro to cede power. The Biden Administration offered limited sanctions relief to try to incentivize Maduro to convene fairer elections in 2024, as per an agreement he signed with the PUD. After Maduro officials failed to comply with that agreement, Treasury ended most sanctions relief, except for specific licenses allowing certain companies to work with Venezuela’s state-owned oil company, *Petróleos de Venezuela* (PdVSA). Since the July 2024 elections, Treasury has imposed sanctions on 45 Maduro officials for electoral fraud and/or postelection repression, most recently on January 10, 2025.

The Trump Administration has yet to define a consistent policy toward Venezuela. Secretary of State Marco Rubio has spoken with González and referred to him as “the rightful president” of Venezuela. Nevertheless, a Trump special envoy subsequently met with Maduro in Venezuela to negotiate the release of six detained Americans and to secure Maduro’s agreement to receive Venezuelans removed from the United States. Maduro paused those flights after Treasury revoked Chevron’s license. Secretary Rubio has threatened to impose sanctions if the Maduro government does not regularly receive such flights.

Sanctions. Sanctions are a key part of U.S. policy toward Venezuela. They are based in various legislated authorities, including the Venezuela Defense of Human Rights and Civil Society Act of 2014 (P.L. 113-278), and include the following:

- **Individual sanctions** for terrorism, drug trafficking, antidemocratic actions, human rights violations, or corruption (see Executive Order [E.O.] 13692; P.L. 113-278; P.L. 114-194)
- **Financial sanctions** restricting access to U.S. financial markets by the Maduro government and PdVSA (E.O. 13808); prohibiting transactions using Maduro-issued cryptocurrency (E.O. 13827); and prohibiting the purchase of Venezuelan debt (E.O. 13835)
- **Sectoral sanctions** blocking assets and prohibiting unlicensed transactions with PdVSA, Venezuela’s central bank, and the state gold mining company, among other entities (E.O. 13850)
- **Sanctions on the Maduro government** blocking assets in the United States and prohibiting transactions with the Maduro government unless authorized as part of efforts to aid the Venezuelan people (E.O. 13884)

Indictments. In March 2020, the Department of Justice indicted Maduro and 14 top officials for narco-terrorism, drug trafficking, and other crimes.

Migration. Since FY2022, Venezuela has ranked among the top countries of origin for migrant enforcement encounters at the Southwest border. On January 10, 2025, the Biden Administration announced an 18-month extension of temporary protected status (TPS) for Venezuelans, first announced in 2021. In February 2025, the Trump Administration terminated TPS for certain Venezuelans in the United States. It also announced termination of a Biden-era parole program for Venezuelans effective March 25, 2025. TPS holders and parolees who have not obtained another immigration status once their current status expires could be subject to removal.

On February 20, 2025, Secretary Rubio designated the Tren de Aragua (TdA), a prison gang that originated in Venezuela, as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. On March 15, 2025, citing the Alien Enemies Act, President Trump issued a proclamation requiring the immediate detention and removal from the United States of certain Venezuelans he alleges are members of TdA. The President’s action has been subject to legal challenge.

U.S. Assistance. From FY2017 to FY2024, U.S. democracy, development, and health assistance for Venezuela totaled around \$336.2 million. Over that period, the United States provided over \$3.5 billion in humanitarian aid to Venezuela and countries sheltering Venezuelans.

Congressional Action

Congress has supported efforts aimed at restoring democracy in Venezuela through foreign assistance and targeted sanctions, but Members have disagreed on whether broad sanctions should have been imposed and under what circumstances sanctions relief should be granted. The last legislation guiding U.S. policy in Venezuela, the VERDAD Act of 2019 (P.L. 116-64), expired in December 2023. Congress appropriated \$50 million in democracy assistance for Venezuela in FY2024 in (P.L. 118-47), with some funds conditioned on credible democratic elections. The Full-Year Continuing Appropriations and Extensions Act (P.L. 119-4) provided \$50 million in democracy assistance for Venezuela and removed the election-related conditions found in FY2024 appropriations.

In January 2025, Trump Administration officials began a review of nearly all U.S. foreign assistance. The Administration has since canceled thousands of foreign assistance grants and contracts worldwide. The full scope of the terminations remains unclear, though they reportedly include some democracy, health, agriculture, and humanitarian assistance programs in Venezuela as well as programs serving Venezuelan migrants and refugees in other countries.

The 119th Congress could consider legislation to shape U.S. policy toward Venezuela that could include sanctions guidelines, tools to address Maduro’s foreign allies and illicit activities, and authorizations for U.S. assistance. Oversight could examine the degree to which sanctions, terminations in foreign aid, and deportations may affect U.S. policy goals on Venezuela. See CRS In Focus IF10715, *Venezuela: Overview of U.S. Sanctions Policy*.

Clare Ribando Seelke, Specialist in Latin American Affairs

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