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## Venezuela: Political Crisis and U.S. Policy

Over the past several Congresses, some Members have expressed concerns about authoritarian rule under Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro (2013-present). Maduro took office after a narrow electoral victory following the death of Hugo Chávez (in office 1999-2013), founder of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). Maduro has remained in power following elections in 2018 and 2024 that were both considered fraudulent by international observers and the U.S. government. After the July 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 67% of the vote. On January 10, 2025, Maduro began a third term.

The Trump Administration has coordinated removal flights to Venezuela and prisoner swaps with Maduro officials while increasing pressure on Maduro and allied criminal groups. The Administration has designated the Tren de Aragua (TdA) prison gang and the Cartel de los Soles (Cartel of the Suns) as foreign terrorists, enabling new sanctions, law enforcement and immigration actions, and potential military action against these entities and their members. Congress may assess how the implementation of these policies may affect U.S. interests in Venezuela and regional security. Congress could consider legislation or oversight actions to authorize, restrict, or otherwise shape U.S. policies, including U.S. military operations near or in Venezuela.

### Political Situation

Venezuela, which the nongovernmental organization Freedom House categorized as “partly free” under President Chávez, has deteriorated to “not free” under Maduro. Chávez, a charismatic politician, benefited from high oil prices and strong popular support. In contrast, Maduro experienced narrow wins and some electoral defeats (including the 2015 legislative elections). The opposition remained united as the Unitary Platform (PUD) under the leadership of Maria Corina Machado from 2022 to 2024 but has since split over whether to participate in future elections. Most PUD parties boycotted legislative and municipal elections held in May and July 2025, respectively. Maduro’s PSUV dominated both contests.

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. After Venezuela’s attorney general issued

an arrest warrant for González, he fled into exile in September 2024. Machado remains in Venezuela but is in hiding. As of September 1, 2025, the government held 822 political prisoners, according to Venezuelan human rights group Foro Penal.

### Economic and Humanitarian Crisis

By most accounts, Maduro’s government has mismanaged the economy and engaged in widespread corruption. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Venezuela’s gross domestic product (GDP) contracted by more than 80% from 2013 to 2020, exacerbated by low global oil prices and declining oil production. In 2021, a U.S. Government Accountability Office report found that U.S. sanctions imposed since 2017 on Venezuela’s oil industry had contributed to that economic decline. In 2024, Venezuela’s estimated annual GDP growth reached 5.3%, but the country’s economy remained less than half the size it was in 2013 (not adjusted for inflation). Although hyperinflation has abated since 2019, income levels remain insufficient for most households to purchase basic necessities. According to one national survey by a Venezuelan university, roughly 73.2% of the population of 26.7 million lived in poverty in 2024, particularly outside the capital of Caracas.

In 2025, an estimated 7.9 million Venezuelans (28.6% of the population) required humanitarian assistance, according to the UN. Many households lack reliable access to potable water; electrical service and gas supply interruptions persist. Despite some 40% of Venezuelans experiencing food insecurity, the World Food Program reportedly halved its programs in August 2025, citing a lack of donor support.

UN agencies estimated there were some 7.9 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants globally in December 2024. As of May 2025, some 6.9 million of those resided in Latin American and Caribbean countries. Venezuelan refugees and migrants reportedly face obstacles accessing job opportunities and health care services; they may be vulnerable to human trafficking and other abuses.

### 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”; 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 U.S. and international recognition but never exerted power in Venezuela. The U.S. government recognizes Edmundo González as the “rightful president” of Venezuela.

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 through aid to the Guaidó 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, the U.S. Treasury Department ended most sanctions relief, except for specific licenses allowing certain companies, including U.S. oil company Chevron, to work with Venezuela’s state-owned oil company, Petróleos de Venezuela (PdVSA).

The second Trump Administration has yet to define a consistent policy toward Venezuela. Since January 2025, U.S. officials have negotiated two U.S. detainee releases and the resumption of U.S. removal flights with Maduro officials. Treasury revoked and then granted a revised license to Chevron, which is expected to boost the companies’ profits and increase Venezuela’s oil production.

Recent Trump Administration actions could signal a hardening of U.S. policy. Secretary of State Marco Rubio designated the TdA a foreign terrorist organization, and Treasury designated the Cartel of the Suns—a drug cartel led by Maduro, per a 2020 U.S. indictment—a Specially Designated Global Terrorist. In August 2025, the State Department doubled the reward offered for information leading to Maduro’s arrest to \$50 million.

Also in August, the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) deployed several Navy ships to waters near Venezuela, ostensibly to combat drug trafficking linked to Venezuela. Ships reportedly deployed include but are not necessarily limited to a group of three amphibious ships with a total of about 2,200 embarked Marines, a cruiser, and two or three destroyers. These ships are capable of performing various missions at sea or against land targets, suggesting potential aims for the deployment that could go beyond drug interdiction and be intended as a show of force to intimidate Maduro. On September 2, 2025, DOD carried out a lethal strike on a vessel purportedly transporting drugs from Venezuela; the operation killed 11 people reportedly in the TdA. Some have questioned the legality of the strike. Others are concerned about the effects of the strike and potential future U.S. military operations on regional stability and U.S. relations with the region.

**Sanctions.** The United States imposes various sanctions on Venezuela-related individuals and entities. The sanctions are based in various legislated authorities, including the Venezuela Defense of Human Rights and Civil Society Act of 2014 (P.L. 113-278). They include targeted sanctions on individuals and entities 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). In his first term, President Trump imposed sanctions on PdVSA (E.O. 13808 and E.O. 13884); Maduro-issued cryptocurrency (E.O. 13827); transactions involving Venezuelan debt (E.O. 13835); and sectoral oil sanctions, as well as sanctions on Venezuela’s central bank and the state gold mining company, among other entities (E.O. 13850).

**Migration.** The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has terminated the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) that had shielded over 600,000 Venezuelans from removal. DHS also has begun the process to end a Biden-era parole program for Venezuelans. TPS holders and parolees who have not obtained another immigration status once their current status expires could be subject to removal.

DHS has conducted removal flights to Venezuela and reportedly has removed thousands of Venezuelans to third countries. In March 2025, DHS sent more than 200 Venezuelans alleged to have ties to TdA to a prison in El Salvador, citing the 1798 Alien Enemies Act; in July, those prisoners were returned to Venezuela in exchange for 10 Americans detained by Venezuela. In September 2025, an appellate court blocked DHS from removing Venezuelans under the Alien Enemies Act.

**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.

The Trump Administration paused, reviewed, and ultimately canceled thousands of foreign assistance grants and contracts worldwide. The terminations reportedly include health and agriculture programs in Venezuela as well as most democracy and human rights assistance to the democratic opposition and civil society. UN agencies and other implementers have scaled back their programs in Venezuela and for Venezuelans in other countries following the U.S. aid cuts. The United States was a major donor.

### 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 (P.L. 118-47) and in FY2025 (P.L. 119-4) and is currently considering the FY2026 budget request (which does not have country-specific allocations). The House Appropriations Committee’s proposed FY2026 National Security, Department of State, and Related Programs Appropriation (H.R. 4779) would provide \$50 million for democracy programs in Venezuela.

The 119<sup>th</sup> Congress could consider legislation to shape U.S. policy toward Venezuela through sanctions, an authorization of U.S. military force in Venezuela or legislation to limit military actions, or authorizations and appropriations of U.S. foreign assistance. Oversight could examine the degree to which U.S. sanctions and licenses, foreign aid cuts, removals of Venezuelans in the United States, and law enforcement and military actions may affect U.S. policy goals regarding Venezuela and neighboring countries. See CRS In Focus IF10715, *Venezuela: Overview of U.S. Sanctions Policy*.

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