Haiti- Venezuela- Colombia

Comparative Points in U.S. Foreign Policy  
2021



**Preface: An Introduction to Our Concerns**

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The Biden administration has a unique opportunity to alter long-standing policy in effort to build a more humanitarian and sustainable world. Historically, US foreign policy in Latin America has been challenged with making good on its promises to support democratic processes fairly and without interference. The current policy holds these same challenges, risking even deeper alienation of trust across the hemisphere by driving what amounts an ambiguous support of democracy with an anti-humanitarian stance across key sites in the region, which risks even greater negative repercussions throughout the Western hemisphere.

The following two pieces focus on the case points of Haiti and Venezuela. As we will argue, US sanctions imposed on the Venezuelan government[[1]](#footnote-1)—under the pretext of humanitarian and democratic concerns—deeply hurt the common people of Venezuela and only compound the polarizing conflict. Haiti's government meanwhile—amidst an intense humanitarian and political conflict in which congress has been disbanded and is under defacto authoritarian rule—is receiving unwavering support from the US government, both from the former Trump and current Biden administrations.[[2]](#footnote-2) The following pieces will trace the development of these negative policies under the Trump era and analyze the more recently declared positions by the Biden administration.

Ned Price, the new spokesperson for the Department of State under the Biden administration, has said that he does not foresee “any contact with [current Venezuelan president Nicolás] Maduro anytime soon,”[[3]](#footnote-3) suggesting that the US will continue to back the already failed parallel state led by Juan Guaidó. Moreover, there is no indication that the Biden administration will lessen the impact of the deadly sanctions in Venezuela. Despite their ineffectiveness and clear harm, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken defended the sanctions strategy and called for more targeted measures in order to make "regime enablers feel the pain."[[4]](#footnote-4)

While an ineffective hardline stance was reinforced in the case of Venezuela under a highly contested pretext of human rights, the actual mass human rights violations in Haiti have been ignored and even abetted. The current Haitian President Jovenel Moïse receives the full support and trust of the US government as he claims executive power until February 7, 2022, despite Haiti’s judiciary system ruling that Moïse’s term ended early in February.[[5]](#footnote-5) Directly following the announcement by the U.S. to greenlight Moise’s extended unelected stay in power, thousands of people took to the streets in protest.[[6]](#footnote-6) The protests were met with police violence that left one person dead and numerous others injured, including two journalists.[[7]](#footnote-7) In the past year dozens of people have died in extrajudicial killings[[8]](#footnote-8) and hundreds more have been kidnapped by Moise backed militia groups.[[9]](#footnote-9) This storm of politically and economically motivated kidnappings and government backed violence has been consistently argued by protesters in Haiti to be an effort to suppress the political opposition.[[10]](#footnote-10) Contrary to his position on the government in Venezuela, Biden continues to support Moïse presenting evident contradiction and creating increased mistrust in U.S. leadership across the hemisphere.

It is not too late, however, for a change of course. Biden can still leverage popular rebuke of Trump to alter these policies in order to put humanity and peace at the forefront of US policy in a manner that captures popular support within the US and in the hemisphere. As we will argue in this report, it is critical for the Biden administration to change course in order to resolve inherent contradictions and biases that have been inherited by previous regimes. It is essential, and still very possible, to redirect the interests of the American people towards an era of peace and cooperation that will be necessary in order to address the compounding transnational issues including root causes of migration, health and the pandemic, and climate change reversal.

**Contradictions of U.S. Policy on Human Rights:   
Haiti and Venezuela Reveal Hardline Error in the U.S. Approach to Foreign Policy in Latin America**

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The Biden Administration’s recognition of opposition leader Juan Guaidó as interim president of Venezuela, and the recently botched invasion and coup attempt, are the latest developments in the country’s turbulent relationship with the U.S.[[11]](#footnote-11) While the relationship between the two nations has been in decline through recent years, the current financial embargo and overt calls for military intervention[[12]](#footnote-12) are a concerning escalation in U.S. aggression on the part of the Trump administration and in defiance of international norms.[[13]](#footnote-13) The Biden administration has shown no desire to change course, committing to not engage in diplomatic relations with current Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. These policies are a continuation of the U.S.’s long standing strategy of regime change and use of economic embargoes as a cornerstone of foreign policy. Part of this strategy, as is the case in Venezuela, involves the claim that human rights are violated, thus justifying intervention. However, around the world, the U.S. abandons its espoused hardline policies toward human rights violations if the regime is friendly to U.S. market and economic interests, as is the case in nearby Haiti. In this paper, I argue, by comparing the case studies of Haiti and Venezuela that the U.S.’s contradictory and inconsistent response to human rights abuses signifies how the U.S., with the aid of NGOs, uses the umbrella of human rights and democracy promotion as an ostensible motive for regime change.

While the promotion of fair elections and the protection of human rights are positive aims of U.S. foreign policy, an examination of the U.S. response to the ongoing political and humanitarian crisis in Haiti denotes contradictions from the policy in Venezuela. Despite markedly similar cause for concern regarding Haiti’s President Jovenel Moïse’s undemocratic governance and rampant human rights abuses, the U.S. continues their bilateral cooperation with Moïse’s government.[[14]](#footnote-14) President Moïse has delayed elections, which were set to take place in October of 2019, by over a year[[15]](#footnote-15). Biden’s administration—to the deep chagrin of the fervent Haitian protestors and their supporters throughout the world—announced in February that the United States intends to support Moïse through 2022, the year Moïse claims he will finally allow for elections. In the absence of free and fair elections Moïse dismissed Parliament in January and has been ruling by decree; despite this, the U.S. continues to back Moïse and even distinguishes him as a “democratically elected president.”[[16]](#footnote-16) For over a year, Haiti has been devastated by police violence and constant protests which started over misappropriation of oil revenue earned under the PetroCaribe accord, and have expanded into wide-spread anti-government and anti-corruption social movements.[[17]](#footnote-17) In response to the protests, Moïse has used the military and police to violently crack down on protestors and suppress civil society.[[18]](#footnote-18) As a result of the continued U.S. backing of Moïse, protestors have directed their efforts towards the U.S. and its embassy, demanding that the U.S. end its support for Moïse.[[19]](#footnote-19) However, undeterred by his corruption, abuses of power, and rampant human rights violations, the Biden administration continues to back President Moïse unwaveringly.

Notably, this is not an isolated incident of the U.S. backing a leader in Haiti despite a multitude of human rights abuses. From 1957 to 1986 the U.S. provided devastating support to the Duvalier regime. Over the course of the 30-year period, the Haitians were subject to a father and son team of dictators dubbed “Papa Doc'' and “Baby Doc.” They committed what the UN described as “crimes against humanity” and stole and estimated hundreds of millions of dollars from the Haitian people. After seizing power in a military coup, François "Papa Doc'' Duvalier proclaimed himself "president for life" and instituted a ruthless dictatorship. The U.S. government ignored the brutality, corruption, and human rights abuses of Duvalier, and even went so far as to train and fund his police. Under the leadership of Baby Doc, who took power with the endorsement of the U.S. government, at the urging of financial investors, these abuses grew immensely.[[20]](#footnote-20) He used death squads that killed an estimated 60,000 of his regime's critics while continuing to embezzle and accruing hundreds of millions of dollars of national debt. They killed hundreds of political prisoners imprisoned in a network of prisons known as the ‘Triangle of Death.’ The media was censored, and some journalists were even tortured, imprisoned, or exiled.[[21]](#footnote-21) After the exile of Baby doc, Haiti democratically elected leftist Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who was quickly overthrown in a U.S. backed coup.[[22]](#footnote-22)

After Aristide's short-lived democratic presidency, Haiti’s government quickly continued their human rights abuses by carrying out extrajudicial killings, massacres, and destruction of homes through the “G-9” death squad, all with the aid of the U.S.[[23]](#footnote-23) As the government in Haiti has increased violence, killings, and repression, the U.S. too has increased its military aid, in violation of the U.S.’s Leahy law.[[24]](#footnote-24) The Center for Economic and Policy Research has reported that in August 2020 “the State Department notified Congress that it was reallocating $8 million from last year’s budget to support the HNP [Haitian National Police]. Since Trump took office, the U.S. has nearly quadrupled its support to Haiti’s — from $2.8 million in 2016 to more than $12.4 million last year. With the recent reallocation, the figure this year will likely be even higher. U.S. funding for the Haitian police constitutes more than 10 percent of the institution’s overall budget.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Not only is the administration willfully indifferent to ongoing abuses, but they are also funding them. The U.S.’s past and continued disregard for human rights violations perpetrated by allied governments in Haiti exemplifies the U.S.’s often superficial, and even exploitive, relationship with human rights abroad.

Like Haiti, Venezuela and the U.S. once shared a strong bilateral alliance and strategic friendship. Venezuela, under the Punto Fijo Pact government, was lauded by the U.S. as a “model democracy” for Latin America.[[26]](#footnote-26) This relationship was altered with the 1998 landslide election of Hugo Chávez, who systematically altered the country's government. Notably, Chávez's election posed a challenge to the decades-long promotion of U.S. economic interest in the region. Upon taking office Chávez famously reorganized the state oil industry to fund social programs intended to promote human development. The ensuing disputes over the industry’s profits altered the ‘friendly’ relationship between the two countries, antagonized in part by Venezuelans deposed of power who seek to remedy these changes through U.S. foreign policy intervention.[[27]](#footnote-27)

While the U.S. and non-governmental organizations started to heavily emphasize the human rights issues that emerged during the Chávez regime, according to their own reports, the same rights abuses existed under the previous Punto Fijo government, in some cases at a higher rate. In a scathing Human Rights Watch report from 2008 “A Decade Under Chávez,'' discrimination on political grounds was cited as the “most defining,” human rights abuse of the Chávez presidency. However, in the same report they also pointed to pervasive political discrimination in Venezuela’s government “for at least 30 years before Chávez's election.” While criticizing his court packing, they also acknowledged that, “he inherited a judiciary that had been plagued for years by influence-peddling, political interference, and, above all, corruption.”[[28]](#footnote-28) The Department of State’s own Venezuela Country Report on human rights Practices for 1996 cited the poor pre-Chávez rights record including “extrajudicial killings by the police and military, torture and abuse of detainees, failure to punish police and security officers accused of abuse, arbitrary arrests and excessively lengthy detentions, illegal searches, corruption and severe inefficiency in the judicial and law enforcement systems, and extremely harsh prison conditions.”[[29]](#footnote-29)

In the very same year, 1996, undeterred by the rampant human rights violations and undemocratic institutions, the Clinton administration stated that, “U.S. relations with Venezuela are close. The two countries share a strong mutual commitment to democracy. As the U.S. number-one supplier of foreign oil, Venezuelan commercial ties are close. Major U.S. interests in Venezuela include protection and promotion of U.S. exports and investment... and maintaining access to a leading source of foreign petroleum.”[[30]](#footnote-30) In the same report the State Department reaffirmed its commitment to “promoting the interests of U.S. companies” and applauded Venezuela's opening of its petroleum sector to foreign investment in 1996 which “created tremendous trade and investment opportunities for U.S. companies.”[[31]](#footnote-31) It would appear that the U.S.’s robust relationship with the Punto Fijo pact government despite its rights abuses exemplifies the disingenuous nature of the calls for human rights protections under Chavez and Maduro. Ultimately, it was the reshaping of U.S. economic interests, not a change in human rights status, which altered the U.S.’s response to human rights in Venezuela.

This is not to say whether criticisms of rights abuse under Chávez and Maduro should or should not be investigated. Rather, the disparity between U.S. response to abuses in the same country under different leadership epitomizes how the U.S. superficially uses human rights to exploit public opinion and justify intervention against governments resistant to U.S. hegemony. In profound ways, U.S. intervention even exacerbated human rights abuses under both Chávez and Maduro. The same Human Rights Watch report praised Chávez’s early attempts at protecting human rights, and pointed to the 48-hour coup d'état, which temporarily removed Chávez from office, as the most dramatic setback for human rights in the region. The coup against Chávez resulted in an unelected president who, “in his first official act, dissolved the country's democratic institutions, suspending the legislature and disbanding the Supreme Court.”[[32]](#footnote-32) The Bush administration, which had prior knowledge of the coup, made no moves to condemn the undemocratic seize of power.[[33]](#footnote-33) The current special envoy for Venezuela under President Trump, Elliott Abrams, who was implicated in the Iran-Contra scandal for withholding information from congress, was actually a senior advisor in the Bush administration at the time of the coup.[[34]](#footnote-34) While the White House denied any involvement in the coup, it is not implausible, as the U.S. has participated in regime change in Latin America over 40 times in the last century.[[35]](#footnote-35) After the failed coup the Bush and Obama administrations continued “funding opposition political organizations in Venezuela and lobbied regional governments, again and again, to censure Venezuela in multilateral organizations, like the Organization of American States (OAS).”[[36]](#footnote-36) The U.S. support for ousting Chávez, even before any alleged rights abuses, illustrates how the U.S.’s antipathy for the Venezuelan government predates and is independent from their condemnation of human rights violations. The early push for regime change, coupled with indifference to human rights abuses perpetrated by the pre-Chávez government, signal how current criticisms are rooted in hostility towards a socialist government rather than genuine concern for the protection of human rights.

In response to the erosion of human rights guarantees in Venezuela under Maduro, the U.S. has taken far reaching economic and diplomatic measures to undermine Maduro’s authority. In that vein, the U.S. cut diplomatic ties to the Venezuelan government and recognized Juan Guaidó as Venezuela’s rightful leader, based on the allegation that the 2018 elections resulting in Nicolás Maduro’s victory were fraudulent. Guaidó’s claim to power is then derived not from popular will or due process of the law, but an interpretation of the constitution’s rules of emergency interim succession.[[37]](#footnote-37) Additionally, the U.S. supports their claim of President Maduro’s illegitimacy on the grounds of various human rights violations levied against his government. The U.S. declared a national emergency in the region based on “persecution of political opponents; curtailment of press freedoms; use of violence and human rights violations and abuses in response to anti-government protests; and arbitrary arrest and detention of anti-government protestors, as well as the exacerbating presence of significant government corruption.”[[38]](#footnote-38)

Following years of increased sanctions and hardline diplomacy, actions purportedly intended to aid the Venezuelan people have, in effect, hurt them more. The UN human rights commissioner has recognized that the sanctions are exacerbating the crisis and increasing suffering for millions of Venezuelans. Former U.S. ambassador to Venezuela, William Brownfield, even acknowledged: “If we are going to sanction PDVSA [Venezuelan Oil], it will have an impact on the entire people, on the ordinary citizen. The counter argument is that the people suffer so much from the lack of food, security, medicines, public health, that at this moment perhaps the best resolution would be to accelerate the collapse, even if it produces a period of suffering of months or perhaps years.”[[39]](#footnote-39) These millions, who once relied upon government subsidized food and medicine, are without their basic needs. As a result, U.S. sanctions are helping fuel the mass exodus of Venezuelans creating the largest refugee crisis in the Western Hemisphere with more than 4.5 million fleeing the country.[[40]](#footnote-40) In effect, the Trump administration has cruelly compounded one of the worst humanitarian disasters of the 21st century in the middle of a worsening global pandemic, all under the guise of human rights and democracy. Meanwhile, the Biden administration has indicated that they foresee no significant changes in policy against Venezuela and will continue to back President Moïse in Haiti regardless of the comparable abuses of human rights and erosion of democratic institutions. In the former administration's own words, so long as Moïse promotes “U.S. economic stakeholders,” he will enjoy U.S. diplomatic support.[[41]](#footnote-41)

The comparison of the U.S. response to human rights violations and democratic upheaval in Venezuela and Haiti demonstrate how the world’s most powerful government is willing to tolerate unlimited oppression and abuse, so long as those despotic regimes are favorable to U.S. economic and oil interests. The discrepancies in U.S. policy towards these abuses are also not isolated to these case studies; there is a pattern of U.S. tolerance to tyranny and priority of economic interest in other countries and regions around the world, even prior to the Cold War. In effect, these policies have exacerbated the suffering of millions and ultimately undermined the United States. Under the leadership of Trump, Pompeo, and Bolton, foreign policy in Latin America and the Caribbean has taken an especially destructive course, turning much of the region bitterly against us. The U.S. is now at a crossroads. With its own anti-democratic leader, who subverted human rights at home and abroad, leaving office, there is an opportunity for the new administration to denounce the blatant contradictions and reverse U.S. foreign policy in the region. So far, the Biden administration has yet to prove up to the task. But it is far from too late. The embargo in Venezuela is hurting the people, not the regime. It is critical to reevaluate U.S. interventionism and consider the real consequences of such unilateral measures. In Haiti, the U.S.’s apathy to President Moïse’s abuses and disregard of the Haitian’s protests undermines its foreign policy ideals and hurts both countries in the long run.

In sum, the transition from the Trump to the Biden administration provides a unique opportunity to reverse the long-time double standard in U.S. foreign policy, where economic interests have taken precedence over concern for a consistent and rational response to human rights abuse in the hemisphere. A more humanist approach is imperative for the long-term protection of human rights, democracy, and U.S. standing around the globe.

**Special Report: Evaluating US Actions Against Venezuela Through a Pragmatic and Humanitarian Lens**

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**Introduction**

Research on the United States’ economic sanctions against Venezuela brings forth critical evidence demonstrating that the people of Venezuela bear the brunt of such policy in severely limited access to food and healthcare. The sanctions have frozen all Venezuelan assets abroad, prohibited the Venezuelan government from procuring food and medical resources, prohibited aid from other countries, and have denied Venezuela’s government access to international financial institutions.[[42]](#footnote-42) Along with the United States’ recognition of Juan Guaidó as the interim president of Venezuela, despite Guaidó not having stood in any national election, the rationale that remains salient for most in Venezuela today is that the sanctions are overtly in place to foment regime change in the oil rich nation.

In late March of 2020, the United States furthered their offensive by accusing the president of Venezuela, Nicholas Maduro, of drug trafficking, effectively “indicting” him of the charges while placing a large monetary reward—$15 million—for information leading to his arrest.[[43]](#footnote-43) Shortly after the announcement, US military forces were mobilized both at the Venezuelan-Colombian land border and offshore in the Caribbean Sea, suggesting to Maduro imminent invasion.[[44]](#footnote-44) In May 2020, a private U.S. company with potential ties to the US military assisted the Venezuelan opposition to stage a failed coup.[[45]](#footnote-45)

This essay analyzes the United States’ existing policy regarding Venezuela, arguing that it causes major humanitarian harm and simultaneously undermines its own purported concerns over Venezuelan democracy. The failures in this policy reveal how little is actually known within US leadership about the people of Venezuela and the political tensions experienced in the country today. A humanitarian approach is recommended to appoint a non-partisan commission across various sectors of society in both countries including Afro-descendant and Indigenous rural communities as well as professionals and working people in urban informal and working-class neighborhoods. Rejecting hardline policy, and instead promoting intercultural dialogue, will create a space for restoring an equitable and mutually beneficial relationship between Venezuela and the United States.

**Background Information**

On January 25, 2019, Elliott Abrams was hired by the US State Department to lead the regime change effort against the current Venezuelan government.[[46]](#footnote-46) Abrams, perhaps best known for his prior conviction for withholding information from Congress during the Iran-Contra Affair and as the essential architect for the invasion of Iraq, was also connected to the failed Venezuelan coup of 2002 and was an integral player in covering up the humanitarian abuses by United States backed militaries in Central America during the Reagan administration.[[47]](#footnote-47) Abrams was pardoned by George H.W. Bush in 1992. Now, in his new role as the United States Special Representative for Venezuela, every few months or so Abrams joins a scattered press room to discuss the recent developments in what has amounted to a global gridlock over the South American oil-rich nation. On February 18, 2020, for example, he took questions on the new sanctions imposed against Rosneft Trading S.A—a Russian Oil Brokerage Firm—for dealing with Venezuela. Abrams opened the media session by discussing the plight of the folks now referred to as the “Citgo 6,” a group of Citgo executives arrested in Venezuela on charges of white collar crime.[[48]](#footnote-48) He raises their case as a form of justification for the US hostility to Venezuela and its various supporters, claiming that their imprisonment was “cruel and indefensible.”[[49]](#footnote-49) The Venezuelan government has a different story, charging the executives for willful embezzlement, money laundering, and criminal association.[[50]](#footnote-50) The disagreement over the criminal case has been polarized, raising doubts on both sides over the abuse of law and the legal system.

In the same 2019 report, Abrams narrated several other accusations including a bizarre story about Juan Guaidó being attacked in an airport by “thugs dressed as airline employees,” in which Guaidó was able to “escape without injury.”[[51]](#footnote-51) Abrams then assured the press that the escalating sanctions would not end until the Venezuelan people are ‘free.’[[52]](#footnote-52) Escalating the tensions, on March 26, 2020, the United States accused the President of Venezuela, Nicolás Maduro—along with over a dozen of other current or former members of the Venezuelan government—of drug trafficking without any apparent evidence. Prosecutors have alleged that Maduro led a violent drug trafficking cartel as he ascended to political power. A $15 million reward has been offered for information that leads to the arrest of Maduro.[[53]](#footnote-53) While the charges have yet to be substantiated, they represent a dramatic escalation of tension between Venezuela and the United States and portend further US action against the Maduro government.

Venezuelan people are anything but a united force in support of US intervention. Massive protests against US involvement routinely take place in major Venezuelan cities and millions of people continue to support the government through its 22-year period of socialist reforms since Hugo Chavez’s first election in 1998.[[54]](#footnote-54)  While a significant number of high profile Venezuelans have influenced the Trump administration and are well-established as a lobby aligned with the Cuban-American lobby based primarily in Florida and New Jersey, a further investigation into the legislative process in Venezuela and the supporters of Maduro’s government themselves (who are primarily lower income, Black and Indigenous) who have made substantial gains in the revolution are not represented in U.S. policy. Since the United States officially recognized Juan Guaidó as the interim President of Venezuela on January 23, 2019, Guaidó has been discredited as a viable leader for the opposition. Meanwhile, the rhetoric of the anti-Maduro lobby in the United States has increasingly moved to overcome socialism at all costs, suggesting that the reasons for the hardline approach has more to do with their political alignment against socialism (whether democratic or not) than it does with actual human rights violations. Such a strategy also appears largely designed in publicity for the Trump GOP base since it has had little effect—and has in some cases backfired—among opposition and non-partisan sectors in Venezuela.

More at stake for policy reversal are the harsh, and what some see as overtly coercive, economic sanctions against Venezuela initiated by the Venezuela Defense of Human Rights and Civil Society Act of 2014. The opening text made clear that the new legislation was meant “to impose targeted sanctions on persons responsible for violations of human rights of antigovernment protesters in Venezuela.”[[55]](#footnote-55) Despite the limited scope called for in the 2014 legislation, the ever-progressing sanctions have devolved into an intensely damaging string of economic policy that has limited the Venezuelan government’s ability to provide multiple social services including food and medicine to the Venezuelan people. The sanctions have disabled the Venezuelan government’s ability to restructure their debt, effectively squashing any opportunity for economic stability.[[56]](#footnote-56) All further diplomatic ties, as well as critical aid for Venezuela, has been sent to Guaidó, and not to the Venezuelan government.[[57]](#footnote-57)

Roughly five weeks after the charges of narco-trafficking, two United States ex-military personnel were part of an attempted coup against the government of Venezuela. The attempt came almost exactly one year after the United States’ last coup plot in late April, 2019. Like the ill-fated coup attempts of years past, the attempted coup in May 2020 failed. While it is unclear if the US government was involved in this latest plot, it was, nevertheless, suggestive of US ties to forcibly overturn the Venezuelan government.

During the 2020 State of the Union Address, the former President of the United States, based on misinformation and an attempt to consolidate a bi-partisan front with heightened aggression, stated that “we [the US government] are supporting the hopes of Cubans, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans to restore democracy” and that Maduro “is a tyrant who brutalizes his people.”[[58]](#footnote-58) Trump’s claim that regime change in Venezuela will be both beneficial to democracy and humanitarian efforts, however, is clearly ingenuine, and represents a hardline cold war position that is increasingly unpopular in the hemisphere.

We see the current U.S. policy position towards Venezuela as contradictory and untenable. The existing policy of economic sanctions, the imposition of Juan Guaidó without democratic reason, and the crude accusations of narco-trafficking against several Venezuelan officials are evidently *understood as an undemocratic effort to force regime change.* The sanctions, in particular, have caused incommensurate humanitarian harm, violating its own original intent and guidelines.

**Effects of the US Sanctions Against Venezuela**

While the United States Government has maintained that the sanctions against Venezuela are in response to humanitarian abuses and antidemocratic movements, the economic restrictions imposed by the United States have exacerbated the inability for many Venezuelans to access their basic needs in the realms of healthcare and food security. Executive order 13692, issued by former US President Barack Obama in 2015, declared the political situation in Venezuela a national emergency to the United States. The national emergency, according to the executive order, was justified due to “the Government of Venezuela’s erosion of human rights guarantees... as well as the exacerbating presence of significant public corruption.”[[59]](#footnote-59) Since the executive order, and continuing after the recent elections in Venezuela in December 2020, potent sanctions have been imposed on Venezuela supposedly aimed at crippling the Venezuelan government’s abilities and power. Instead, U.S. imposed sanctions have deeply hurt ordinary people in Venezuela, critically impacting their access to food and medicine.

The current United States policy against Venezuela also includes freezing all Venezuelan assets abroad.[[60]](#footnote-60) Additionally, Juan Guaidó—not the Maduro government, the entity responsible for funding social programs and public services—receives critical US aid to Venezuela, having been designated as the opposition leader and interim president by the United States and other foreign powers.[[61]](#footnote-61) By doing so, the United States created a failed parallel state with Guaidó as the main figurehead. Unfortunately for the US government on this matter, Guaidó has failed to achieve growing support and has been linked to paramilitaries and corruption of his own.[[62]](#footnote-62)

These policies have not gone unexamined. In a 2018 report published by the Center for Economic and Policy Research, scholars Mark Weisbrot and Jeffrey Sachs harshly criticize the US measures and argue that economic sanctions have fundamentally harmed the people of Venezuela rather than the government.[[63]](#footnote-63)  In February 2021, Alena Douhan, a human rights lawyer working for the United Nations, published a preliminary report on the US sanctions, calling the measures “devastating” and “illegal,” noting that they “violate international law” and “the principle of sovereign equality of states.”[[64]](#footnote-64) She went on to recommend their removal. Academic Joy Gordon has noted that the inability for the Venezuelan government to gain revenue through exporting oil, an endeavor which comprises “95 percent of the country’s export revenue and accounts for 25 percent of its GDP,” incapacitates the government’s ability to purchase crucial imports including food and medicine for its citizens.[[65]](#footnote-65)

Food imports have dramatically decreased in Venezuela over the last 7 years—from $11.2 billion of purchases in 2013 to $2.46 billion 2018—unequivocally because of a collapse of government revenue due to the restrictive sanctions they face.[[66]](#footnote-66) Fuel shortages in gasoline and diesel, caused by sanctions against the oil industry, contribute to the difficulties of producing, storing, and distributing food in a sustainable and effective manner.[[67]](#footnote-67) The World Food Program of the United Nations released a report on February 25th, 2020 which stated that one in three Venezuelans are food insecure and “in need of assistance.”[[68]](#footnote-68)

In addition, many critical health assistance programs in Venezuela were being funded by the state oil company which is now unable to export and gain revenue.[[69]](#footnote-69) As of 2018, tens of thousands of Venezuelans have been unable to receive dialysis or cancer treatment; and an estimated 4 million people, again only as of 2018, have been unable to access diabetes and hypertension care. [[70]](#footnote-70) The lack of financial resources caused by sanctions has also caused the Venezuelan government to be unable to provide sufficient vaccines to control otherwise manageable diseases like malaria and measles.[[71]](#footnote-71) This is only compounded during the COVID-19 pandemic. This array of facts assuredly influenced the United Nations Human Rights Council, as the group released a report criticizing the sanctions, claiming that the measures “disproportionately affect[ed] the poor and the most vulnerable classes.”[[72]](#footnote-72) The Center for Economic and Policy Research report estimates that from 2017 to 2018 alone over 40,000 people have died due to the United States sanctions against Venezuela.[[73]](#footnote-73)

The sanctions have effects beyond food and medicine, as well. Loss of government funds due to the sanctions have led to a significant loss of supplies for school which has been traditionally supplied by the government.[[74]](#footnote-74) Additionally, fallen government revenue caused by the sanctions have led to severe difficulties funding social security and public services like roads, electricity, and water.[[75]](#footnote-75) Each of these shortcomings compounds the stark deficiency of food and medicine, as public services are relied upon for transportation and functioning infrastructure.

Revealingly, former National Security Advisor of the United States John Bolton was quoted saying that the economic sanctions “will make a big difference to the United States economically if we could have American oil companies invest in and produce the oil capabilities in Venezuela.”[[76]](#footnote-76) The underlying economic motivations for sanctions have become increasingly clear to the wider population in Venezuela as inducement to impose regime change. Meanwhile, large sectors of the population of Venezuela believe that their representatives were fairly elected and that the current system is capable of delivering free and fair elections.[[77]](#footnote-77)

If the United States is consistent in apprehending humanitarian and democratic abuses, aid would be given directly to legitimate sources for the Venezuelan people who need it, and not be limited to Guaidó’s small faction, nor used as a ploy to foment regime change outside of democratic means. If the United States government were to be concerned with avoiding humanitarian disaster, coercive and damaging sanctions would not be in place. Furthermore, if the United States wanted to preserve Venezuelan democracy, propping up a far-right opposition figure with no indication of popular support would be laughable.

**Narco-trafficking Indictment**

The recent charge of narco-terrorism against Maduro and other Venezuelan government officials is consistent with the United States’ escalation of sanctions and push for regime change against Venezuela.[[78]](#footnote-78) It follows Guaidó’s appearance at the State of the Union Address along with the bellicose rhetoric that night by Trump describing the need to have Maduro’s regime “smashed and broken.”[[79]](#footnote-79)

The charge is also, however, quite ironic when the widely reported levels of global narco-trafficking are examined. Colombia is by far the largest producer and illegal exporter of cocaine, with Venezuela comprising less than 10% of global cocaine trafficking.[[80]](#footnote-80) Colombia moves roughly 2,400 metric tons of cocaine per year while Venezuela moves about 200 tons per year.[[81]](#footnote-81) In the context of the US’s promise to push with “maximum pressure” to remove Maduro from office, the move to accuse him of terrorism and offer a reward for information leading to his arrest is clearly political in nature.

Staying with the comparison to Colombia, we might also notice an astronomical rate of human rights abuses largely ignored. The Columbian Commission of Jurists (CCJ) contends that the Colombian government covers up the political killings of social leaders who advocate for policies contrary to those of the current government.[[82]](#footnote-82) The CCJ has stated that 90% of human rights violations occur with impunity.[[83]](#footnote-83) Hundreds of other organizations in Colombia have sent the United Nations letters documenting the Colombian government’s unwillingness to combat human rights abuses by paramilitaries and failure to provide a sufficient check on the power of police and security forces.[[84]](#footnote-84) The United States, however, condones the Colombian government’s blind eye to human rights abuses. The hypocritical nature of the narcotrafficking indictment could not be clearer: While Colombia’s narco-trafficking and human rights profile raises serious concerns, the United States lauds their partnership, hardly bothered with a pro humanitarian argument to punish their ally in the region.[[85]](#footnote-85)

While the latest coup attempts in Venezuela have all failed miserably,[[86]](#footnote-86) the decision to indict Maduro can be seen as a precursor to military involvement in Venezuela in order to mount the strongest push for regime change yet seen.[[87]](#footnote-87) Since the charges of narco-trafficking against Maduro and other members of the Venezuelan government, the United States has mobilized military forces near Venezuela, including a doubling of military assets in the Caribbean Sea in a move that Maduro and many activists believe are set as a precursor to armed conflict.[[88]](#footnote-88) If the new military assets are not intended to threaten and/or carry out armed conflict with Venezuela and are simply positioned to prevent drug trafficking, navy ships’ strategic positioning in the Caribbean Sea is quite confusing when consulting the widely accepted maritime narco-trafficking maps—the vast majority of efforts clearly taking place in the Pacific Ocean.



*Maritime drug flows from South America in 2016. Photo: Adam Isaacson* [[89]](#footnote-89)

Similar to the deployment of sanctions, without the essential context of US-Venezuela relations, the narco-trafficking indictment and the subsequent positioning of navy command in the Caribbean would appear to be quite ironic, both contrary to the data and to what a rational, humanitarian-minded observer would expect. With knowledge of the frayed relationship between the United States and Venezuela, it is obvious that the indictment is political in nature and intended to support undemocratic regime change.

**Conclusion**

In sum, the current policy contradictions call for a change in policy concerning Venezuela. The overall impact of US sanctions in Venezuela has been extremely damaging. Food and medicine imports have been crippled, causing major shortages. Furthermore, Juan Guaidó’s position as the opposition leader has only diverted essential aid resources away from the many Venezuelans who need it. The indictment of narco-trafficking against Maduro and others in the Venezuelan government does next to nothing to stop further illegal drug trades into the United States, evidenced by the fact that the charges do not target the major players. In the context of the larger scope of United States and Venezuelan relations, and due to the fact that Venezuela has been reported to have significantly less influence in narcotrafficking than their neighbor Colombia—a deeply entrenched ally to the United States—it becomes clear that the narcotrafficking indictment against Maduro was a political move rather than a good faith legal move to protect the law and American public.

Both previous strategies, the ever-increasing sanctions and the charge of drug trafficking against Maduro, appear to be grounded in the hope for regime change—a regime change that will be neither democratic nor humanitarian despite Elliot Abrams’ and Donald Trump’s fervently proclaimed humanitarian and pro-democratic aims.

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