

Crisis in Venezuela



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Venezuelan student protesters and police in January 2009 during the government of President Hugo Chavez.

The United States historically had strong diplomatic and economic relations with Venezuela. The country has the world's largest oil reserves and is the third largest source of imported oil for the United States. For many decades, Venezuela was a democratic state.

The positive relationship between the U.S. and Venezuela rapidly changed in 1998. Venezuelans elected Hugo Chavez president that year. His political program was known as *Chavismo*. It combined elements of socialism, nationalism, land reform, and opposition to U.S. intervention in Latin America. Declassified documents revealed that the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency had prior knowledge of a 2002 coup d'etat attempt against Chavez but did not warn Chavez.

Chavez's policies made the Venezuelan economy more dependent than ever on oil exports. Venezuela imported almost all consumer goods, including food. Through oil revenue, Chavez's government programs reduced poverty, illiteracy, and infant mortality in the country. But Chavez also relied on repression of the press and political opponents to maintain power. After Chavez died in 2013, his vice president Nicolas Maduro was elected as president.

After Maduro came to power, international oil prices plummeted. The government responded by simply printing more *bolivars*, the Venezuelan currency. Bolivars are now virtually worthless. Food and medicine are either unavailable or impossibly expensive. Water and electricity supplies continue to be unreliable at best. An estimated 2.6 million Venezuelans have left the country. Over one million have gone to neighboring Colombia.

Like Chavez, Maduro used political repression and censorship to maintain power. Maduro has jailed political opponents. In 2015, the National Assembly packed Venezuela's highest law court with Maduro loyalists. In 2017, the court temporarily dissolved the National Assembly, Venezuela's legislature. Tens of thousands of Venezuelans protested. Maduro himself has maintained alliances with anti-democratic leaders in Turkey, Cuba, China, Iran, and especially Russia.

U.S. Position Toward the Maduro Government

In 2014, President Barack Obama issued an executive order imposing financial sanctions against Venezuelan officials. Obama cited arbitrary detention of anti-Maduro protesters. With mixed results, Obama attempted to address the Maduro government's human rights violations.

Early in his presidency, President Donald Trump's administration issued sanctions on Maduro and other Venezuelan officials. The sanctions froze the officials' financial assets in U.S. banks. They also prohibited U.S. persons from doing business with Venezuelan officials accused of corruption and human rights abuses. More recent sanctions froze the American accounts and assets of PDVSA, the Venezuelan state-owned oil company.

Maduro's rivals, the U.S. government, the European Union, and various human-rights groups deemed Maduro's 2018 re-election as fraudulent. Opposition leader Juan Guaido was head of the National Assembly. He declared himself president of Venezuela in January 2019.

The Trump Administration quickly recognized Guaido as Venezuela's legitimate president. European nations such as Britain, France, Germany, Spain, as well as most other countries in South America also recognized Guaido. Recent U.S. sanctions stated that proceeds of future PDVSA sales should only be under the control of Guaido or another newly elected government.

In a press release, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo called for "the end of Maduro's brutal regime and the peaceful restoration of democracy in Venezuela." To date, the Venezuelan military leadership has continued to support Maduro. Guaido has called on members of the military to defect to his side and has urged Venezuelans to continue street protests. Demonstrations starting on May 1, 2019, turned violent, as protesters clashed with security forces.

U.S. Foreign Policy Options

Some U.S. officials recommended the Trump Administration place added pressure on the Maduro government. In 2019, U.S. Special Representative for Venezuela, Elliott Abrams, informed the Senate that the U.S. may expand its sanctions. The U.S. plans to target its sanctions against any person, entity, or foreign body that gives aid to the Maduro government. Some observers say that the sanctions make bad economic problems even worse for everyday Venezuelans but do not punish Maduro and government officials.

Trump has also declared "a possible military option, if necessary." Further, Guaido has not ruled out U.S. military intervention. But critics of this option point out that it would be disastrous for the already suffering Venezuelan people. They also say it would require massive U.S. troop deployment. Russia and China would likely veto any United Nations (UN) resolution for intervention in Venezuela.

Most U.S. lawmakers have encouraged the U.S. to provide Venezuelans with food, medicine, and other humanitarian aid. Maduro's government blocked a U.S. shipment of 200 tons of aid materials in February 2019 on a bridge between Colombia and Venezuela. However, the Red Cross representative in Colombia criticized the U.S. government's effort. He said the unilateral attempt to deploy aid was wrong unless the U.S. coordinated with non-governmental humanitarian groups. A UN spokesperson also warned that U.S. aid should not be politically motivated. In other words, it should not be aimed at ousting Maduro.

Writing & Discussion

1. Describe the changes in the U.S. relationship with Venezuela over the last few decades.
2. Do you think the U.S. should have recognized Guaido's presidency? Why or why not?
3. Which U.S. foreign policy option do you prefer for Venezuela? Why? Is there another foreign policy option not listed in the reading that you would prefer? If so, what is it?



Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro

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Opposition leader Juan Guaido

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