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This House Supports (THS) US efforts to remove the Maduro Government in Venezuela.

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‘A giant game of chicken’: Trump’s Venezuela standoff edges toward conflict

NPR, By John Otis, November 27, 2025

The U.S. military buildup in the southern Caribbean Sea near Venezuela is raising expectations of an armed strike against that country but also fears that it could create a South American quagmire.

Tension is building as the Trump administration amasses warships and thousands of troops in the Caribbean. On Monday, it designated Venezuela’s government, led by President Nicolás Maduro, as a foreign terrorist organization. And while saying Tuesday that he was open to talking with Maduro, President Trump has also hinted that the authoritarian leader’s days are numbered.

But American military intervention, which is strongly supported by many Venezuelans, including opposition leader and Nobel Peace Prize recipient María Corina Machado, would be unpopular at home and extremely risky.

“This cozy idea that somehow Maduro falls and the next day María Corina Machado walks into the presidential palace and everybody lives happily ever after is fantastical,” said Phil Gunson, who is based in Caracas for the International Crisis Group. “That won’t happen.”

Ever since his first term, President Trump has pushed to depose Maduro, who has crushed Venezuela’s democracy and led the country into economic misery, prompting some 8 million Venezuelans to flee the country. Trump has long encouraged Venezuelan military officers to overthrow Maduro and in 2019 recognized opposition lawmaker Juan Guaidó as the country’s legitimate president.

But Maduro has clung to power, prompting Trump, in his second term, to consider military options.

The most extreme would be a full-fledged U.S. invasion along the lines of the American takeover of the tiny isthmus of Panama in 1989 that involved 27,000 American troops and led to the arrest of that country’s dictator, Manuel Noriega.

But even though Trump has dispatched the largest U.S. naval flotilla to the Caribbean since the Cuban Missile Crisis, experts say the 15,000 U.S. troops aboard those warships would not be enough to take control of Venezuela. The South American country is larger than Texas and home to rugged mountains and Amazon jungle.

Should the U.S. put together a more robust invasion force, it could quickly subdue Venezuela's army. Indeed, many of its poorly paid rank-and-file soldiers might switch sides. But there would be substantial push back from unconventional forces, says Jeremy McDermott, co-director of Insight Crime, which analyzes organized crime in Latin America.

"Any serious land invasion of Venezuela would be extremely complex," McDermott said. "You put boots on the ground almost anywhere in Venezuela, particularly in Caracas and along the border areas, and you are going to face armed resistance."

That resistance, he said, would include pro-Maduro militias, known as "colectivos," as well as at least 1,000 battle-hardened Colombian guerrillas who are based inside Venezuela, sympathize with Maduro, and would act as a pro-regime paramilitary force in the event of a U.S. invasion. In addition, the Maduro government has been handing out weapons to civilians and training them to shoot.

"This is a peoples war to defend our country," one military trainer told Venezuelan state TV.

Yet most Venezuelans despise Maduro and voted against him in last year's presidential election that was considered by many — including the U.S. government — to have been stolen by his regime. One Venezuelan analyst, who asked to remain anonymous for his safety, said he's seen polling, yet to be made public, that shows that most Venezuelans would support U.S. military action to remove Maduro.

"There is no other way," said Zair Munday, a former Venezuelan government prosecutor now living in exile in Florida.

Last week, opposition leader Machado issued a "freedom manifesto" for a post-Maduro future calling for the restoration of human rights, free markets, free speech, clean elections and the return of Venezuelan exiles. She declared: "We stand at the edge of a new era."

Meanwhile, anti-government influencers in Venezuela are promoting AI-generated videos fantasizing about U.S. intervention. One shows Maduro in an orange prison jumpsuit in the custody of American officials, with narration that says: "All Venezuelans want this as our Christmas present."

That's in sharp contrast to a new CBS News and YouGov poll in which 70% of Americans opposed American military action in Venezuela. In the same poll, just 13% considered Venezuela a "major threat" to the United States. As a result, even a limited strike against Maduro, such as a catch-and-kill operation like the one against Osama Bin Laden — who was responsible for the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks -- seems doubtful, says Venezuelan opposition congressman Henrique Capriles. In contrast to Bin Laden, "do Americans really care about Maduro?" Capriles said. "Not at all."

Trump may be betting that his military buildup will create a pressure cooker in Caracas that will provoke a palace coup by military officers. But that's a longshot as Maduro has surrounded himself with loyalists and Cuban bodyguards.

Vladimir Villegas, a Caracas radio show host, says that the impact of the U.S. pressure campaign so far has been to create more cohesion within the ranks of the Maduro regime as well as more persecution and repression of the political opposition.

Even if Maduro were toppled, there's no guarantee the new leader would forge a stable, democratic government, Capriles says. He points out that Maduro controls all branches of government while members of his United Socialist Party occupy nearly every city hall and state house across the country.

What's more, there would be rising demands for U.S. reconstruction aid following U.S.-backed overthrow of Maduro but Trump is, famously, no fan of nation-building.

"What about the day after" a coup? Capriles says. "Is the U.S. willing to spend \$100 billion to help stabilize Venezuela?"

Officially, what's being called "Operation Southern Spear" is an anti-narcotics mission with U.S. forces blowing up alleged drug boats in the Caribbean. But Venezuelan political analyst Benigno Alarcón says that's not much to show for such a massive military buildup.

"I don't think they can call this operation a success if all they do is sink 10 boats and kill 80 drug traffickers," he says.

McDermott, of InsightCrime, calls the standoff "a giant game of chicken."

"Maduro knows that if he can hang on, President Trump can't keep 11% or more of U.S. fleet indefinitely off the coast of Venezuela," he says. "So as long as Maduro doesn't blink, time is on his side."

Venezuela and US conflict: What's it all about?

DW, by Matt Pearson Published 12/11/2025

The US seizure of an oil tanker near Venezuela is not the only point of contention between the two countries. Drugs, oil, sanctions and election disputes are all playing a part in the escalating conflict.

In recent months, Trump has dispatched covert CIA operatives to Venezuela, vowed to crack down on the country's drug gangs, sought mass deportations of Venezuelans from the US, sent the world's largest aircraft carrier to the region, as well as 15,000 troops and fighter jets and also sunk dozens of alleged "drug boats," leading to a reported 87 deaths.

But how has it come to this?

What is the context of the US-Venezuela conflict?

Relations between the two countries have been strained since 1999, when left-wing populist Hugo Chavez became president of Venezuela. Chavez then accused the US of supporting an attempted coup against him in 2002 before Venezuela expelled its US ambassador later that year.

Tensions slowly heightened after the current but disputed president, Nicolas Maduro, took over after Chavez died in 2013 and then spiked during Trump's first term in 2019. During that year, the US backed Maduro's opponent, Juan Guaido, in a dispute over the 2018 presidential election that lasted until 2023 and saw a global split in support for the rival candidates.

Maduro was reelected in 2024, beating independent candidate Edmundo Gonzalez. The president's main rival, Maria Corina Machado, had been barred from running after being convicted of being involved in a "corruption plot" along with Guaido by Venezuela's Supreme Court. Many international observers believed the case to be fabricated.

There was widespread skepticism about the election result. Then-US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the US had "serious concerns that the result announced does not reflect the will or the votes of the Venezuelan people."

In October, Machado was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. On Wednesday, her daughter accepted the prize on her behalf at the award ceremony in Oslo, the Norwegian capital. But Machado then made a surprise late appearance despite fearing for her safety. She said that she would return to Venezuela where she has been living in hiding for almost two years.

She is widely expected to become president if Maduro is forced out of office.

Does the US want Nicolas Maduro out?

Maduro said in September that the US is "seeking a regime change through military threat," and added last week that Trump is "fabricating an extravagant narrative, a vulgar, criminal and totally fake one" as a pretext for such a move.

Trump has been slightly less direct, mentioning in reference to the oil tanker that "other things are happening" without further explanation. However, he did tell the media outlet Politico last week that Maduro's "days are numbered" and has refused to rule out a ground invasion of Venezuela.

The US president's much discussed National Security Strategy, has also raised alarm in Latin America. In reference to the "Western Hemisphere," the document states: "We will reward and encourage the region's governments, political parties, and movements broadly aligned with our principles and strategy" and "assert ourselves confidently where and when we need to in the region."

Is Venezuela currently sanctioned by the US?

Yes, the sanctions imposed on Venezuela are extensive, and have been since the 2019 dispute.

Back then, Trump signed an executive order that stated: "All property and interests in property of the government of Venezuela that are in the United States ... are blocked and may not be transferred, paid, exported, withdrawn, or otherwise dealt in".

These sanctions are broadly similar to those placed on Cuba, Iran and North Korea.

Is the US interested in oil from Venezuela?

In the case of the seized tanker, yes. "We keep it, I guess," said Trump when asked what would happen to the captured oil.

Despite denials from the White House, many observers — and Maduro — think Venezuela's vast oil reserves, yet relatively impoverished society, make it an attractive target for the Trump administration.

The US Energy Information Administration (USEIA) says Venezuela is sitting on an enormous 303 billion barrels worth of crude — equivalent to about a fifth of the world's global reserves.

However, sanctions have locked Venezuela out of most of the world's most lucrative oil markets, forcing it to sell at knockdown prices to China.

The US also still imports around 100 barrels a day from Venezuela — thanks to a license granted to US company Chevron in Venezuela — this is down from around 1,500 in the late 1990s, according to the USEIA.

While the US is the world's leading oil producer, Venezuela produces a heavier crude oil used to make diesel, which is in short supply globally, and which fuels many critical manufacturing processes.

In an open letter last month to the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), of which the US is not a member, Maduro accused the US of making "express threats" toward his country, in a way that "seriously endangers the stability of Venezuelan oil production and the international market."

Are there other considerations for Trump and the US in Venezuela?

The US State Department insists that drug trafficking concerns are the reason for the escalation in Trump's interests in Venezuela, saying the country remains "firm in its counter-drug operations in the Caribbean and its commitment to protecting Americans from the Maduro regime's deadly poison." Trump has said the lethal US attacks on boats are targeting "narco-terrorists".

Such a hardline position on a country that is so geographically close to the US is likely to go down well with Trump's domestic supporters, though the legality of the attacks has been called in to question by many experts in both countries.

The case for overthrowing Maduro

The New York Times, by Bret Stephens, November 21, 2025

Donald Trump said Friday that he had "sort of" made up his mind about his plan for Venezuela, but he "can't tell you what it would be." With an aircraft carrier strike group and some 15,000 service personnel deployed to the region, it is sort of hard to imagine that the president's decision will be to stand down and go home.

I have been outspoken in calling on the administration to act against Nicolás Maduro's dictatorship in Caracas – a column I wrote in January ran under the headline "Depose Maduro." With war looming, possibly within days, it is worth making the case again – and thinking through the ways it could go wrong.

Let's take it point by point.

Is there a vital American interest at stake? There is, and it is not just the one the administration keeps talking about: drugs.

Not that there is much doubt that the regime is deeply implicated in the drug trade, even if there are questions about whether Maduro runs an actual cartel. The most careful analysis I know of, a 2022 report by the InSight Crime think tank, notes that the "principal role" of the president and his henchmen is "to ensure the drug trafficking system functions to the benefit of the regime by placing corrupt and loyal personnel in strategic political and military positions."

But the larger challenge posed by Maduro's regime is that it is an importer and exporter of instability. An importer, because the regime's close economic and strategic ties to China, Russia and Iran give America's enemies a significant foothold in the Americas – one that Tehran reportedly could use for the production of kamikaze drones. An exporter, because the regime's catastrophic misgovernance has generated a mass exodus of refugees and migrants – nearly 8 million so far – with ruinous results throughout the hemisphere. Both trends will continue for as long as the regime remains in power.

Are there viable alternatives to conflict? Economic sanctions against the regime in Trump's first term have worked about as well as economic sanctions usually do – immiserating ordinary people while allowing the regime to entrench itself through its control of ever-scarcer goods. The Biden administration sought detente with the regime by easing some of those sanctions, only to reinstate them after concluding that Maduro had reneged on promises of democratic reforms. Last year's elections, which the opposition won in a rout, were stolen. The opposition leader María Corina Machado, winner of this year's Nobel Peace Prize, lives in hiding.

That leaves two plausible alternatives. The first, suggested by Maduro, is to give the United States a stake in Venezuela's vast mineral wealth, effectively in exchange for allowing him to stay in power. To my surprise, Trump rejected that quasi-colonialist bargain. The second is to use a show of force to persuade Maduro and his senior officials to flee the country, much as Syria's Bashar Assad and his cronies did. To my surprise, too, that hasn't happened, either. At least not yet. On Sunday, Trump said he was mulling talks with Maduro, perhaps to make that latter option more attractive.

Is there a moral case for regime change? Outside of North Korea, few governments have produced more misery for more of their own people than Venezuela's. Starvation, political brutality, corruption, social collapse, endemic violence, collapse of the medical system, environmental catastrophes – the only thing more shocking than the self-destruction of this once-rich country is the relative indifference to the catastrophe, at least among the usual do-gooders who otherwise like to anguish over the plight of others. Why hasn't Greta Thunberg set sail to Caracas with symbolic deliveries of food?

Any morally serious person should want this to end. The serious question is whether American intervention would make things even worse.

Could this turn into another fiasco? Intervention means war, and war means death: Even the swift and effective overthrow of Panama's Manuel Noriega in 1989 led to the loss of 26 Americans and several hundred Panamanians. Maduro's better-armed forces might put up a serious fight. Or they could retreat to the hinterland and start an insurgency, perhaps by joining up with the narco-insurgents across the border in Colombia.

The law of unintended consequences is unrepealable. But there are also important differences between Venezuela and Iraq or Libya. These include a democratically elected leader, Edmundo González, who could govern with immediate legitimacy and broad public support. They include Trump's clear reluctance to put U.S. boots on the ground for any extended period. And they include the fact that we can learn from our past mistakes, not least by promising immediate amnesty and jobs for soldiers, police officers and civil servants in the current regime who are not implicated in its crimes.

What is the balance of risk? Unintended consequences must be weighed against the predictable risks of inaction. If Trump stands down or conducts limited strikes against sites connected to the drug trade while allowing Maduro to survive, the Venezuelan dictator will see it, rightly, as a resounding victory and vindication. The U.S. will have succeeded only in strengthening his determination to hold on to power rather than relinquish it. And Trump's hesitation will be read, especially in Moscow and Beijing, as a telling signal of weakness that can only embolden them, just as President Joe Biden's withdrawal from Afghanistan did.

What is to be done? Maduro should be given a final chance to board a flight with whomever and whatever he can take with him and leave unharmed and unpursued – whether to Havana or Moscow or another friendly capital. Barring that, he deserves the Noriega treatment: capture and transfer to the U.S. to face charges, accompanied by the destruction of Venezuela's air defenses and command-and-control capabilities, the seizure of its major military bases and arrest warrants for all senior officers – with promises of leniency for those who turn themselves in. "If you start to take Vienna, take Vienna," Napoleon is said to have told one of his generals. Same for Caracas, Mr. President.

On Venezuela, Trump Is Forgetting the Lessons of the Middle East

Time Magazine, By Rosemary Kelanic 12/17/2025

President Donald Trump's threats to topple Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro prove the U.S. has learned nothing from nearly 25 years of misadventures in the Middle East, where our win-loss record makes it painfully clear that regime change unleashes more problems than it solves.

Forcefully breaking the Maduro regime could break Venezuela itself—and spur chaos in our own hemisphere.

The Trump Administration has been ramping up the pressure on Maduro. The U.S. began a massive build-up of military forces in the Caribbean in August and announced a strike on an alleged drug boat off Venezuela's coast the following month. The strikes have continued since despite the U.S. producing little evidence the boats carry drug runners, and in October Trump confirmed that the CIA is conducting covert operations inside Venezuela.

Then, on Nov. 21, Trump reportedly spoke with Maduro and issued an ultimatum to leave Venezuela within days.

The next week Trump declared the Maduro-tied Cartel de los Soles a terrorist group, declared Venezuelan airspace closed, and mused about striking Venezuelan land "very soon." And on Dec. 10 the U.S. seized an oil tanker off the coast of Venezuela.

The Trump Administration is also reportedly working on day-after plans if Maduro is removed from office, officials told CNN.

It's still not entirely clear whether Trump's actions are bluffs to scare Maduro into resigning or genuine precursors to a U.S. attack. But if the definition of insanity is doing the same thing while expecting a different result, then flirting with regime change in Venezuela is madness, given just how miserably Washington's many attempts have failed in the past.

In Afghanistan, it took a mere eight weeks and just 2,300 U.S. troops, alongside Afghan rebels, to overthrow the Taliban after it refused to hand over 9/11 mastermind Osama bin Laden. But the war bogged down into a 20-year occupation that reached 100,000 troops at its height and failed to install democracy.

In Iraq, major combat operations to depose Saddam Hussein took less than six weeks, but U.S. forces fought an insurgency for almost nine years before withdrawing in 2011. Three years later, U.S. troops redeployed to fight the Islamic State after it captured roughly 40% of Iraqi territory, with some 2,500 U.S. troops remaining there today.

Together, the disastrous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan killed nearly 7,000 U.S. soldiers (and many more Iraqis and Afghans), cost about \$4.4 trillion, and discredited the idea of boots-on-the-ground regime change.

The Trump Administration may believe it can use force short of a major invasion to swiftly overthrow Maduro with little to no cost or risk, avoiding the traps of Iraq and Afghanistan. And U.S. forces amassed in the Caribbean—some 15,000 troops, along with aircraft, missiles, drones, and expeditionary equipment—are insufficient for a full invasion. Reading the deployment tea leaves, the immediate threat seems to be airstrikes and special operations missions targeting the regime, though of course, U.S. operations could expand later.

But there are history lessons on that too. In 2011, U.S. and NATO airstrikes toppled Muammar Gaddafi's regime in Libya at relatively low cost and without any coalition casualties. But destabilizing Libya proved disastrous. The

instability helped make Libya a top transit hub for people smugglers, and it remains divided and perennially on the precipice of civil war.

To be clear, Maduro is unpopular and Venezuela's military is weak. But that doesn't guarantee that his regime will collapse or that a stable post-Maduro Venezuela will emerge.

The U.S. has avoided the worst spillover effects of its Middle east interventions thanks to its geographical distance from the region, but similar mayhem unleashed in Latin America would almost certainly blow back on the U.S. The irony here is that Trump's own actions could create a self-fulfilling prophecy, worsening the very problems—migration, drug trafficking—he ostensibly seeks to alleviate.

Venezuela is not the Middle East. It has peaceful neighbors and a long democratic tradition. But its massive oil wealth means that it suffers from the same “resource curse” that has fostered civil war, authoritarianism, and instability in the Middle East. To remove Maduro by force, instead of letting change unfold organically, would be a dangerous gamble that risks entangling the U.S. in a new forever war—this time with higher stakes due to proximity.

Maduro is a tyrant, but the risks of ousting him are substantial. No wonder 70% of the U.S. public opposes military action. On the campaign trail, Trump promised to end forever wars, not start them. Attacking Venezuela would break that pledge—and put America Last.

US Sanctions are Robbing Venezuelans of Basic Human Rights

Georgetown Public Policy Review and Rina Rossi, July 3, 2023

Contrary to the United States government's claims that sanctions on Venezuela help fight the country's corruption, sanctions are not protective measures for Venezuela. They come with a deadly cost for its people. As a result of over 15 years of sanctions on Venezuela, \$5.5 billion of Venezuelan funds in international accounts have been frozen, leading to critical shortages of food and medical supplies.

According to the Center for Economic and Policy Research, sanctions have affected more than 300,000 Venezuelans' access to healthcare. This startling number includes 80,000 HIV-infected patients, 16,000 individuals in need of dialysis, and 16,000 cancer patients. Food imports have also dramatically decreased over the last decade—from \$11.2 billion of purchases in 2013 to \$2.46 billion in 2018—unequivocally due to a collapse of government revenue directly tied to restrictive sanctions.

The U.S. argues that sanctions are justified due to alleged human rights abuses and antidemocratic actions. Specifically, the sanctions are intended to reinstate democracy by ousting President Nicolás Maduro out of power and bring the U.S.-backed Juan Guaidó into leadership. Yet, these directives have harmful effects on the very people that it purports to protect. The Obama Administration first imposed sanctions on Venezuela due to concerns over alleged counter-terrorism and anti drug initiatives, as well as for alleged human rights abuses, anti-democratic action and corruption. Following this, the Trump Administration expanded economic sanctions on Venezuela in response to the rising perception of authoritarian rule under Maduro. In particular, Trump imposed an embargo inhibiting the US purchase of petroleum from PDVSA, Venezuela's state-owned oil company, in 2017. Trump also confiscated Venezuela's \$8 billion US subsidiary, CITGO. Because 90 percent of Venezuela's revenue comes from oil, Trump's actions led to a massive economic blow in Venezuela. Under the socialist government, oil revenue is largely supporting social programs such as food, health, and environmental protection.

Opponents urge the Biden Administration to keep stringent sanctions in place, while others suggest that the Treasury Department remove aspects of the sanctions that negatively affect the social, economic, and political rights of Venezuelans. In response, the State Department plans to enact a renewed focus on so-called “targeted sanctions” in cooperation with American allies, which focus on specific individuals. However, even with this renewed focus, the Biden Administration has failed to outline particular strategies on how these sanctions will not harm the Venezuelan people. In fact, mainstream think tanks, legislators, politicians and nongovernmental organizations have not adequately recognized and addressed the dire consequences that US sanctions have had in Venezuela. In particular, Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, Brian A Nichols, circumvented questions about US sanctions having negative effects on Venezuela's humanitarian crisis in a 2022 House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing. Nichols asserted that the country's humanitarian crisis was “squarely” due to the late Hugo Chavez and Maduro's governmental and economic mismanagement, as well as the failure of the Venezuelan private sector. In addition, a lengthy background piece about the Venezuelan crisis published by the Council on Foreign Relations in March 2023 only briefly referenced sanctions as a contributor to the country's economic turmoil.

Recently, the Biden Administration has indicated that it will begin to provide sanctions relief. However, Venezuelan opposition representative Fernando Blasi argues that these strides are proceeding too slowly. Specifically, Blasi asserts that sanctions left in place by the Trump administration still persist, and the Biden Administration has not done much to ease sanctions other than supplying a license to Chevron allowing them to resume restricted oil

production in Venezuela. According to Blasi, these Trump-era sanctions prioritized a regime change in Venezuela. Blasi noted that sanctions relief would provide reassurance for Venezuelans struggling with the stark reality of inflation in the country, which has led to school teachers walking out of their jobs to protest their meager salaries, and many children suffering from malnutrition and stunted growth. In particular, a third of Venezuelans are not getting enough food to eat, as estimated by the United Nations' World Food Programme in 2020. Clearly, citizens are suffering, and these sanctions are not making the country more democratic. The economic burdens that US sanctions imposed on Venezuelans disrupt access to basic human necessities like healthcare, food and running water. Venezuela's water agency, Hidrocapital, reported that 15-20 percent of Venezuelans do not have access to potable water in Caracas because the government cannot obtain access to foreign-constructed parts necessary to repair damaged pipes and pumps due to US sanctions placed on the foreign water pump companies. This creates a negative feedback loop: While Hidrocapital trucks are instructed to carry water to communities in need, the lack of truck parts due to the sanctions on foreign companies has decreased the number of water trucks that deliver to those in need by 75 percent. Due to the lack of water, along with food and medical shortages, there was a 31 percent increase in the general mortality rate in Venezuela from 2017 to 2018, a period that also saw significant increases in US sanctions, amounting to more than 40,000 deaths. Furthermore, this lack of potable water has led Venezuelans to take matter into their own hands, some of whom collect water in buckets, in order to survive. As of November 2022, it has been estimated that Venezuelans suffer from no water for 109.2 hours in each 162 hour week.

Additionally, a United Nations report found that women and adolescent girls, the LGBTQI+ community, pregnant women, disabled individuals, indigenous people, impoverished Venezuelans and older persons are disproportionately affected by the US sanctions in Venezuela. The message is clear: sanctions cause further inequities that undermine the democratization of power.

Unclear to the majority of Americans, however, is that the US Department of State, at the command of multiple US Presidents, has been orchestrating a large-scale human rights crisis for decades. These sanctions are illegal, and violate the Charter of the Organization of American States (OAS). Ironically, the head of the OAS has defended the US sanctions despite the violations of their own charter, raising significant concerns about the legitimacy and biases of the organization. Regardless, executive orders imposing sanctions must note that the US is suffering from a "national emergency" and is facing "an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security" due to Venezuela's actions. We must condemn these malicious and inhumane sanctions that are stripping Venezuelans of basic human rights. We must hold the Biden Administration, who indicated in 2021 that they were in "no rush" to lift the US sanctions on Venezuela, accountable. Likewise, legislators, think tanks and non-governmental organizations who claim to promote human rights must accurately spread global awareness on the unfortunate reality of how US sanctions have contributed to the Venezuelan economic and humanitarian crisis. In compliance with the idealized American values of equality, justice, and humanitarianism, we must stand in solidarity with our Venezuelan brothers and sisters, hold our representatives accountable, and continue to spotlight how the ills of the US State Department have detrimental effects on people and democracy.

About the Author

Rina Rossi is a UC Berkeley alumna and incoming graduate student at New York University, focusing on reproductive justice in the Caribbean. She has a forthcoming publication in the Latino Book Review and her writing has been published in the Daily Californian, Berkeley Political Review and ReVista: The Harvard Review of Latin America. Rina thanks Dr. Angela Marino for her support and mentorship while Rina researched US sanctions in Venezuela at UC Berkeley's Democracy + Media Lab.

The Consequences of CIA-Sponsored Regime Change in Latin America

Cato Institute Research Briefs in Economic Policy No. 371, By Samuel Absher, Robin Grier, and Kevin Grier, February 21, 2024

The CIA regularly intervened in Latin American politics during the Cold War. Supporting the United States' stance against Fidel Castro became a CIA litmus test for Latin American presidents. Even if a president was not a socialist, the CIA worked to destabilize their government if they did not align with the United States on Cuban issues. This seems contrary to President John F. Kennedy's Alliance for Progress plan, launched in 1961, to "promote political democracy, economic growth, and social justice in Latin America," according to the Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History. The CIA justified electoral interference in part by claiming that its missions promoted democracy.

We studied five CIA-sponsored regime changes in Latin America: Ecuador (1963), Brazil (1964), Chile (1964), Bolivia (1964), and Panama (1981). Our research estimates the average effect of these sponsored regime changes on

real incomes, democracy, and civil society in each country. Our results show that these CIA interventions had serious political, economic, and civil repercussions for the targeted countries. Our research finds a relatively large income penalty for CIA-sponsored regime change. The average effect was a 10 percent reduction in per capita income five years after the intervention. Furthermore, CIA interventions in these countries led to large declines in democracy. Five years after an intervention, the average democracy score (using the Polity IV Project measure) was almost 200 percent lower than the predicted score without the intervention. To the extent that these regime changes were unconstitutional, an immediate drop in the democracy score was inevitable. However, not all regime changes that we studied were of this type, and six years was enough time for a score to recover if a new regime was democratic, but no score did. Finally, our research investigates the effects of CIA-sponsored regime changes on governance and civil life in Latin American countries. Our results reveal significant declines in freedom of expression, civil liberty, and rule of law. According to the measures we used, these declines ranged from 20 percent to 35 percent.

We also investigated whether the CIA-sponsored regime changes were different from 25 other coups in the region between 1963 and 1981. All coups were similar in that they were conducted by militaries, but differences emerged with respect to characteristics of the countries before a coup. Among countries that experienced CIA-sponsored regime change, democracy scores were not particularly high the year before the intervention, and average per capita income was \$4,109 (2011 US dollars). However, these democracy scores and average per capita income were higher than the same measures right before coups in countries that experienced non-CIA-sponsored regime change. Among those countries, average per capita income was \$3,196 (2011 US dollars) the year before a coup. Additionally, the average scores for freedom of expression, civil liberties, and rule of law were higher in countries that experienced CIA-sponsored regime change than in countries that experienced non-CIA-sponsored regime change.

Thus, the CIA did not intervene in countries that were particularly badly off relative to others in the region. If anything, the agency intervened in countries that were more democratic, were richer, and had more civil liberties, freedom of expression, and rule of law than other countries that experienced coups during those decades.

Overall, our research is the first to our knowledge to document a clear causal link between CIA-sponsored regime change and deteriorating economic activity and governance in Latin America. Any benefits that accrued to the United States from these interventions must be weighed against the large costs that were imposed on the people living in the affected countries.

NOTE

This research brief is based on Samuel Absher, Robin Grier, and Kevin Grier “The Consequences of CIA-Sponsored Regime Change in Latin America,” *European Journal of Political Economy* 80 (December 2023).

Venezuelans see Maduro weakening, pin hopes on U.S. and Machado,

Miami Herald, By Antonio María Delgado Updated September 25, 2025 5:55 PM

A new nationwide survey suggests Venezuelans believe President Nicolás Maduro’s grip on power is slipping, with a strong majority rejecting his legitimacy and looking to opposition leader María Corina Machado — and to a possible U.S. intervention — to bring about change.

The poll, conducted from Aug. 21-31 by London-based research firm Panterra and released this week, surveyed 1,200 residents across the South American country. It found that 70% of Venezuelans no longer identify with the socialist political movement founded by the late president Hugo Chávez.

Nearly two-thirds of respondents — 63% — said Maduro is not a legitimate president. That view reflects the disputed outcome of the July 2024 election, when opposition candidate Edmundo González Urrutia was widely seen as the actual winner despite the government declaring Maduro victorious.

Among those who don’t support the Maduro regime, the perception is that the government is weakening. More than half of them expect Maduro to be ousted within the next six months, with 36% predicting his fall within three months. A 61% majority said Maduro’s regime is weaker than it was a year ago, while 28% said it is “about the same” and only 11% said it is stronger.

“The sense that the regime is weakening is widespread,” David Bluestone, managing director of Panterra, told the Miami Herald. He noted that increased repression following last year’s election is widely perceived as a sign of desperation. “People are seeing some of the recent moves by the regime as showing their weakness, not showing their strength.”

A series of reports released this week on Venezuela’s deteriorating human-rights conditions found that the regime has intensified its persecution of dissidents, opposition figures and independent activists. The reports include a 165-page document by the United Nations Fact-Finding Mission on Venezuela, which warned that Caracas has pursued “an exacerbated continuation of the plan to annihilate opponents or those perceived as such,” committing acts that amount to crimes against humanity.

The poll also underscores Venezuelans' growing appetite for international pressure. Three-quarters of those who don't support the regime favor a strong U.S. policy aimed at removing Maduro.

"Majorities of non-Chavistas favor broad economic sanctions and individual sanctions on those connected to the regime. Support for direct intervention to remove or arrest Maduro is even higher," the report said, using the term for those who oppose or support the regime founded by former leader Hugo Chávez.

The Panterra poll also highlights the aspirations of Venezuela's vast diaspora. Eight out of 10 people who don't support the regime said their relatives in the United States would likely return if the country held democratic elections and chose a new president.

"A majority of non-Chavistas want the U.S. to support the leadership of Edmundo González Urrutia and María Corina Machado, with only 16% preferring the U.S. negotiate with Maduro and 5% supporting a third force led by ex-Chavista military officials," according to poll results.

The survey indicates that President Trump, who has adopted a more hardline approach toward Maduro than previous U.S. administrations, enjoys notable support among Venezuelans opposed to the regime.

Non-Chavistas hold a favorable view of the United States (55% favorable to 28% unfavorable) and of President Trump (44% favorable to 37% unfavorable), with 75% supporting a future alliance between Venezuela and the U.S. Supporters of the regime, by contrast, express overwhelmingly negative views of both the U.S. (6% favorable to 83% unfavorable) and Trump (4% favorable to 88% unfavorable).

Internally, the opposition remains firmly rallied behind Machado. A large majority of non-Chavistas see her as the leader of the opposition and want her to continue fighting for change from within Venezuela. Nearly 78% of non-Chavistas said they trust her leadership and endorse her approach. Machado's support has remained stable over the past year, with more than 69% of non-Chavistas wanting her to remain as opposition leader. A majority also believe she is "on the right path" and making real progress despite government repression.

Trump claims Venezuela's Maduro is a drug-trafficking threat to the US.

Does the data back him up?

CNN, by Stefano Pozzebón, September 1, 2025

NOTE: This article has been abridged for concision.

The recent escalation of tensions between Washington and Caracas, which has led to the United States deploying at least seven warships to the southern Caribbean, can be traced back to a particular day.

On August 7, US Attorney General Pam Bondi announced a \$50 million reward for information leading to the arrest of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, who has been facing formal drug trafficking charges from the Justice Department since 2020.

Bondi declared that Maduro "is one of the most powerful drug traffickers in the world and a threat to the national security" of the United States.

Caracas has always denied these accusations, but within hours, more than 4,000 US military personnel were deployed to Caribbean waters. Days later, more ships, submarines and aerial intelligence units joined them.

The rapid escalation of the crisis – just days after the Maduro government and the Trump administration celebrated a prisoner exchange and the resumption of Venezuelan oil exports through Chevron – has surprised many and opened rifts within the White House itself, where a faction opposed to Chavismo for ideological reasons is balanced by those who would prefer to avoid dangerous confrontations.

"Donald Trump came to the White House as a president of peace, and the drumbeat from some sectors of the Venezuelan opposition and congressmen from South Florida doesn't fit with the president's message," a US government official with knowledge of Venezuela told CNN, requesting anonymity because he was not authorized to speak on the matter.

But beyond the rhetoric, it is striking that the White House is confronting Maduro over alleged ties to drug trafficking, and not by demanding he restore democracy in Venezuela.

Allegations involving the Miraflores presidential palace in cocaine trafficking have existed for at least a decade. So why this new initiative in recent weeks?

What the data says

Bondi has not presented conclusive evidence of the Venezuelan leader's alleged role in international drug trafficking. At the same time, Caracas has flatly rejected the claims.

"For there to be a drug cartel, either you produce (the drugs), you process it or you traffic it. And if there is no cultivation, production, or drug trafficking in Venezuela, how can there be a cartel? It's unsustainable," Venezuelan congresswoman Blanca Eekhout told CNN, referring to Cartel de los Soles, an alleged drug trafficking organization that the United States claims is led by Maduro and that the Trump administration declared a terrorist organization a few weeks ago.

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Venezuela is not a cocaine-producing country...

Where does the cocaine flow through?

“The majority of Colombian cocaine is being trafficked north along the Pacific coast,” says UNODC.

Although transit through Venezuela is not ruled out, other countries are identified as emerging trends in international drug markets, such as Ecuador, where the sharp increase in homicides is linked to the rise in drug trafficking, according to the UN...

So, is Venezuela free of drug trafficking?

Although United Nations data appears to contradict the White House narrative, the reality is more complex.

The movement of 250 tons of cocaine annually, which Barr accused the Venezuelan government of facilitating, is minor compared to global trafficking (3,700 tons, according to the UNODC). But it is still a significant amount of illicit trade that allegedly generates multimillion-dollar profits for Maduro. At the time, Barr also failed to provide evidence of the illegal trafficking he was alleging.

The Venezuelan government coalition admits that drug trafficking exists in the country, but not that it promotes it...

[On June 25] Hugo “El Pollo” Carvajal, a former high-ranking Venezuelan official, pleaded guilty to conspiring to import cocaine into the United States and to narco-terrorism charges...

At the time, the Miami Herald reported that Carvajal, who was also accused of being part of Cartel de los Soles, was cooperating with US prosecutors, providing evidence against Maduro in exchange for a reduced sentence, something CNN has not been able to independently corroborate...

Does Cartel de los Soles exist?

“Cartel de los Soles, per se, doesn’t exist. It’s a journalistic expression created to refer to the involvement of Venezuelan authorities in drug trafficking,” Phil Gunson, a researcher with the International Crisis Group based in Caracas for more than a decade, told CNN.

This doesn’t mean that there aren’t military personnel or government officials involved in drug trafficking. “The cartels are here, the Colombians and the Mexicans, too. There are drug shipments via the Orinoco River and by air through clandestine airstrips, flights from Apure to Central America, and so on. All of this wouldn’t be possible without direct involvement from above,” the expert said.

For Gunson, Maduro’s role is reminiscent of that of former Panamanian President Manuel Noriega, who was sentenced to decades in prison in various jurisdictions for his association with the Medellín cartel in 1992: an external partner who, while not directly part of a cartel, still benefited from drug trafficking routes under his protection...

From hiding, opposition leader María Corina Machado applauded the recent statements against the cartel. Other sectors of the opposition were more skeptical. Former opposition presidential candidate Henrique Capriles told CNN that the Trump administration must “present the evidence” of the existence of Cartel de los Soles, having previously accused Maduro of involvement in drug trafficking...
