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Venezuela: Political Crisis and U.S. Policy

The political situation in Venezuela has been at a stalemate since Juan Guaidó, head of the National Assembly, became interim president of Venezuela in January 2019. Although the United States and 53 other countries recognize Guaidó's government, he has been unable to wrest Nicolás Maduro from power and convene free and fair elections. Guaidó and Maduro have engaged in talks to end the standoff since May, but actions taken by security forces loyal to Maduro, including the torture and killing of a naval officer in custody, have hindered prospects for a negotiated solution.

Background on the Political and Economic Crisis

Maduro, leader of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), was narrowly elected in 2013 after the death of populist President Hugo Chávez, who had served since 1999. Most Venezuelans and much of the international community considered Maduro's May 2018 reelection illegitimate. Maduro has used the courts, security forces, and electoral council to quash dissent. The human rights organization *Foro Penal* estimated that the regime held 601 political prisoners as of July 1, 2019. Maduro has since pledged to release 22 of those prisoners.

Maduro's government has mismanaged the economy and engaged in massive corruption, exacerbating the impact of a decline in global oil prices and collapsing oil production on the country's economy. According to the International Monetary Fund, Venezuela's economy contracted by 18% in 2018. Inflation may exceed 10 million percent in 2019.

Shortages in food and medicine, declines in purchasing power, and a collapse of social services have created a humanitarian crisis. In April 2019, U.N. officials estimated that some 90% of Venezuelans are living in poverty and 7 million are in need of humanitarian assistance. Health indicators, particularly infant and maternal mortality rates, have worsened. Previously eradicated diseases like diphtheria and measles have returned and spread. In June 2019, U.N. agencies estimated that at least 4 million Venezuelans had left the country, 3.2 million of whom were in Latin America and the Caribbean. Migrant flows could increase, as electrical blackouts have worsened conditions, including access to potable water, considerably.

Interim Government Challenges Maduro Regime

The National Assembly elected Juan Guaidó as its president on January 5, 2019; he is a 35-year-old industrial engineer from the Popular Will (VP) party. In mid-January, Guaidó announced he was willing to serve as interim president until new presidential elections are held. Buoyed by a massive turnout for protests he called for, Guaidó took the oath of office on January 23, 2019. The United States and 53 other countries (including most of the European Union [EU] and 15 Western Hemisphere countries) recognize Guaidó as interim president of Venezuela and view the National Assembly as Venezuela's only democratic institution.

Under Guaidó's leadership, the National Assembly has since enacted resolutions declaring Maduro's mandate illegitimate, establishing a framework for a transition government, drafting a proposal to offer amnesty for officials who support the transition, and creating a strategy for receiving humanitarian assistance.

Guaidó's supporters organized two high-profile efforts to encourage security forces to abandon the regime, neither of which succeeded. On February 23, they sought to bring emergency supplies donated by the United States and others positioned on the Colombia- and Brazil-Venezuela borders into the country. Security forces loyal to Maduro killed seven individuals and injured hundreds, as forces prevented the aid convoys from crossing the border. Some of that aid is being distributed to Venezuelans and host communities in Colombia. Separately, both Guaidó and Maduro agreed to allow the International Committee of the Red Cross to provide aid within Venezuela.

On April 30, 2019, Guaidó and Leopoldo López, a former political prisoner and head of the VP party who had been released from house arrest by pro-Guaidó military officials, called for a civil-military rebellion against Maduro. Forces loyal to Maduro violently put down pro-Guaidó supporters and attacked journalists. Resulting clashes resulted in four deaths and hundreds of injuries and arrests. As the day ended, López sought refuge in the Spanish Embassy.

Many observers regard the military's participation as essential for the opposition's transition plan to work. For now, however, aside from the former head of the national intelligence agency, the military high command appears to remain loyal to Maduro, who reappointed his defense minister on July 5, 2019. Many military leaders have enriched themselves through corruption, drug trafficking, and other illicit industries. Some military leaders may fear that they could face prosecution for human rights abuses under a new government, even though the opposition has proposed amnesty for those who join their side.

Human Rights Concerns

Human rights abuses have increased as security forces and civilian militias have violently quashed protests and detained and abused those suspected of dissent. In 2017, security forces committed serious human rights violations during clashes with protesters that left more than 130 killed and thousands injured. A July 2019 report by the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) estimates that security forces committed some 6,800 extrajudicial killings from January 2018 through May 2019. OHCHR also details how intelligence agencies have arrested and tortured those perceived as threats to Maduro, including military officers and opposition politicians. Maduro loyalists arrested Guaidó's chief of staff in March

and the vice president of the National Assembly in May. Some fear Guaidó could face arrest.

International Response

The international community remains divided over how to respond to the current stalemate in Venezuela. The Lima Group of Western Hemisphere countries and the EU support the Guaidó government but oppose any military intervention to oust Maduro. An International Contact Group, backed by the EU and some Latin American countries, has endorsed negotiations led by Norway leading to the convening of internationally observed elections. Russia, Cuba (which has provided military and intelligence support), Turkey, and a few other countries support Maduro. Russia and China have provided aid to Maduro and blocked efforts at the U.N. Security Council to recognize the Guaidó government. Russia has supported Venezuela's struggling oil industry and sent military personnel and equipment, prompting U.S. condemnation. (See CRS In Focus IF11216, *Venezuela: International Efforts to Resolve the Political Crisis*.)

Recent U.S. Policy

Since recognizing the Guaidó government on January 23, 2019, the United States has coordinated its efforts with Interim President Guaidó and encouraged other countries to recognize his government. The Trump Administration has imposed more targeted sanctions (visa bans and financial sanctions) on Maduro officials and their families and blocked the Maduro regime's access to revenue from Venezuela's state oil company. In addition to increasing humanitarian aid to countries sheltering Venezuelans, the Administration has pre-positioned emergency aid for the Venezuelan people in Brazil, Colombia, and Curaçao. As the situation deteriorated, the State Department withdrew its remaining diplomatic personnel from Caracas in March.

President Trump and top Administration officials have repeatedly asserted, "all options are on the table" to address the Venezuela situation, including using U.S. military force. The Administration has denounced Cuba and Russia's support of the Maduro regime and imposed additional sanctions on Cuba over its support for Venezuela.

Targeted Sanctions. In 2015, President Obama issued Executive Order (E.O.) 13692 authorizing targeted sanctions against individuals who inhibit democratic processes, commit violence or human rights abuses, or engage in corruption. The Trump Administration has imposed sanctions on 78 Venezuelan officials pursuant to E.O. 13692. They include Maduro, his wife, and his son; Vice President Delcy Rodríguez; PSUV First Vice President Diosdado Cabello; Supreme Court members; and the heads of Venezuela's army, national guard, and police. In May 2019, the Administration removed sanctions on a general who broke ranks with Maduro and said that it would do so for others. The United States also has imposed sanctions on at least 22 individuals and 27 entities for drug trafficking.

Broader Sanctions (Including Oil Sanctions). The Administration has issued executive orders restricting the ability of the government and of Venezuela's state oil company, *Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A.* (PdVSA), to access

the U.S. financial system (E.O. 13808), barring U.S. purchases of Venezuela's new digital currency (E.O. 13827), and barring U.S. purchases of Venezuelan debt (E.O. 13835). On November 1, 2018, President Trump signed E.O. 13850, creating a framework to sanction those who operate in Venezuela's gold sector or are complicit in corrupt transactions with the government. On January 28, 2019, pursuant to E.O. 13850, the Administration imposed sanctions on PdVSA to prevent Maduro and his regime from benefitting from Venezuela's oil revenue. Secondary sanctions are being applied to individuals and entities doing business with Maduro. Some observers are concerned that the stronger economic sanctions are worsening the humanitarian situation.

Humanitarian Assistance. The United States is providing assistance and helping to coordinate and support the regional response to the Venezuelan migration crisis. The United States has committed to providing more than \$213.3 million since FY2017 for Venezuelans who have fled to other countries and for the communities hosting them.

Congressional Action. Congress provided \$17.5 million for democracy and rule of law programs in Venezuela in FY2019 (P.L. 116-6). The Administration's proposed FY2020 budget asks for \$9 million in democracy aid and authority to transfer up to \$500 million to support a transition or respond to a crisis in Venezuela. The House-passed FY2020 minibus, H.R. 2740 (Division D covers foreign operations appropriations and references H.Rept. 116-78 to H.R. 2839) would provide \$20.5 million for democracy programs in Venezuela.

House-reported legislation includes H.R. 549, to make certain Venezuelans in the United States eligible for Temporary Protected Status (a companion bill, S. 636, has been introduced in the Senate); H.R. 1004, to prohibit the use of U.S. military forces in combat operations in Venezuela; and H.R. 2500, the FY2020 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which includes language similar to H.R. 2204 that would prohibit federal contracting with persons who have business ties to the Maduro regime. The Senate-passed version of the FY2020 NDAA, S. 1790, has a similar provision.

Senate-reported legislation includes S. 1025, reported with an amendment in May 2019 to include language similar but not identical to three House-passed measures. The measures are H.R. 854, which would authorize expanded humanitarian aid to Venezuela; H.R. 920, which would restrict arms transfers to the Maduro government; and H.R. 1477, which would require an assessment of the threat posed by Russian-Venezuelan security cooperation. Other initiatives introduced include S.J.Res. 11, to prohibit the unauthorized use of the U.S. military in Venezuela.

Also see CRS In Focus IF10715, *Venezuela: Overview of U.S. Sanctions*; CRS In Focus IF11029, *The Venezuela Regional Migration Crisis*; and CRS Report R44841, *Venezuela: Background and U.S. Relations*.

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