

Instability in Venezuela

Overview

Nicolás Maduro, the current constitutional president of Venezuela, was first elected in April 2013 after the death of socialist mentor Hugo Chávez. During Maduro's first term, the Venezuelan economy entered a freefall, and many Venezuelans blamed Maduro's socialist policies for the decline. Despite this, Maduro was reelected in 2018 in an election that has been deemed neither free nor fair by the global community and internal opposition parties.

The leader of this opposition and president of the Venezuelan National Assembly, Juan Guaidó, has gone so far as to declare Maduro a usurper who has left the presidency vacant of a legitimate leader. This chaos, coupled with the hyperinflation that has accompanied the tanking of the country's economy, has led many Venezuelans to flee to more stable regions of Latin America. Those who stay are faced with currency that is worth essentially nothing, which makes purchasing anything from food to toiletries all but impossible.



Illustration of the destinations of Venezuelan refugees. Graphic from BBC.

Sides of the Issue

The mass exodus and regional instability caused by Maduro's reelection has become a prevalent topic on the global stage. As the situation continues to worsen, it has become clear that a concerted effort will be necessary if the humanitarian crisis and corrupt governance is to be stopped. There are differing opinions, though, on how this intervention should be approached.

The US response has been largely focused on supporting the opposition to Maduro. Between 2014 and 2018, the US committed \$37 million in “bilateral democracy assistance” to the opposition party, as well as \$568 million in combined humanitarian and economic aid¹. The accompanying rhetoric and sanctions have been direct and aggressive: 115 individuals have been sanctioned, hundreds have had their visas revoked, and an oil embargo has been enacted in an effort to restrict Venezuelan access to US markets. Meanwhile, the White House has informed Maduro’s government that any action that threatened a US diplomat or Guaidó would be met with a stern response.

This aggressive statement came just days after over 20 countries, including the US, recognized Guaidó as interim president until a new, fair election is held. Maduro informed the involved nations that they had to withdraw the ultimatum, claiming that “Venezuela is not tied to Europe.”

While the US’s approach to subverting Maduro has been belligerent, the European response has been far more subtle. Norway has hosted several peace talks between the Maduran and Guaidan sides of the conflict, and plans to hold at least one more in its bid to find a peaceful resolution. Though this is backed by the EU’s threat to increase sanctions that will affect a much larger list of individuals than it currently does, the European response thus far has been much less bellicose than the US’s.

Regardless of what the “best” approach to resolving this conflict may be, it is crucial that something is done to mitigate the resulting humanitarian crisis. The longer it stretches on, the more unstable the region will grow, and the more danger the refugees will face.



Police officers standing before a crowd of people trying to cross the Venezuelan-Colombian border. Image from the Council on Foreign Relations.

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<https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/sep-25-2019-united-states-increases-contribution-response-venezuelan-regional-crisis>

Questions to Consider for Debate

1. With the refugee and humanitarian crisis in mind, what is the best way to quickly and peacefully resolve or mitigate the conflict within Venezuela?
2. What aspects of each approach (i.e. the US's aggressive approach vs. the European peace-brokering approach) have proven effective? How could these aspects be combined to form one concerted international effort?
3. Should the international community be involved in overseeing the fairness of Venezuela's election, or should it focus its efforts on addressing the ever-worsening refugee crisis?

Sources

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