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My name is Andres Martinez-Fernandez. I am the Senior Policy Analyst for Latin America at The Heritage Foundation where I lead the Foundation's work on U.S.-Latin America policy. The views I express in this testimony are my own and should not be construed as representing any official position of The Heritage Foundation.

Since January of this year, Venezuela has seen a dramatic shift away from the repressive narcodictatorship that once dominated the country. This is a reality that many in the world had written off as a realistic possibility following over two decades of authoritarian consolidation in Venezuela. However, Venezuela is now living under a dramatically different reality thanks to President Trump's 2025 pressure campaign against the Maduro regime, culminating with the January 2026 military operation to capture Nicolas Maduro.

The Trump administration's engagement in Venezuela has made major strides toward dismantling the Maduro regime's repressive apparatus, including delivering clear behavioral shift away from the widespread human rights abuses under Maduro. One key achievement toward this end has been the ousting for foreign enablers of Venezuelan repression and human rights abuses, including Cuba, China, and Russia.

Without a doubt, additional progress is needed along the transition process, particularly around implementation of an electoral timeline, release of political prisoners, and reform of democratic institutions. The Trump administration has repeatedly made clear that it seeks elections and a full democratic restoration for Venezuela.

The full restoration of democracy through free and fair elections in Venezuela is the best guarantee against the country's potential backsliding toward repressive authoritarianism. At the same time, the Trump administration is right to pursue an initial stabilization effort focused on underlying economic and institutional conditions instead of pressing for the immediate

convocation of elections. This is necessary, not only for ensuring a lasting restoration of democratic stability, but also addressing the core concerns of the Venezuelan people.

We must recognize that the despair of the Venezuelan people under the Maduro regime stemmed from both the regime's authoritarian repression as well and the destruction of any semblance of economic prosperity and stability. Indeed, even under the Maduro regime, polling showed that the main concerns of the Venezuelan people stemmed from the dire economic realities they faced. Ahead of the fraudulent 2024 Venezuelan elections, stabilizing the economy was the number priority for voters.<sup>1</sup> Surveys of Venezuelan migrants living abroad also show that the economic crisis is the key drivers of the mass exodus of millions of Venezuelans from their country. Some 70% of migrants cite the economic crisis as their main motivation for leaving their country, with insecurity being the second most often reason cited.<sup>2</sup>

For millions of Venezuelans who have for years faced extreme poverty, malnutrition, and hyperinflation, their basic economic wellbeing is their most important human rights concern. It is therefore not only appropriate, but essential that the Trump administration treat economic stabilization as a top priority, not only for the sake of the Venezuelan population, but also for the sake of hemispheric stability.

Polling and economic indicators show that additional progress is needed in stabilizing the Venezuelan economy, however there are signs of progress and continued optimism. As recently as May, a majority of Venezuelans expected the economy to improve over the next six months.<sup>3</sup>

Concerted U.S. engagement can and is bringing about the dismantling of the authoritarian apparatus. The stabilization of the economy will also facilitate continued progress toward these ends. The U.S. Congress recognize and enable the historic gains made in just a few short months through the Trump Administration's policies. Congress can empower these efforts by ensuring robust resources are available for humanitarian assistance and U.S. Southern Command.

The recent earthquake offers an important reminder of both the consequences of corrupt socialist dictatorial rule in Venezuela as well as the benefits of the direct U.S. engagement which has been enabled by President Trump's policies toward Venezuela. Where once the Venezuelan regime actively shunned offers of U.S. humanitarian and disaster aid, the U.S. has now been able to aggressively deploy life-saving disaster aid and support to the Venezuelan people. Additionally, it is not only U.S. government efforts but also private and religious organizations like Samaritans Purse that are driving resources and aid to Venezuela.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [Poll Tracker: Venezuela's 2024 Presidential Election | AS/COA](#)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.jointdatacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Venezuelan-Migrants-and-Refugees-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.elnacional.com/2026/05/8-de-cada-10-venezolanos-considera-que-la-economia-es-mala/>

<sup>4</sup> [Samaritan's Purse Venezuela Earthquake Response](#)

## Backdrop of Extreme Human Rights Abuses

When considering the current human rights situation in Venezuela, it is essential to understand the context in which Venezuelan society and institutions have existed for the past two decades. That is a context of egregious and widespread human rights abuses without accountability. A context in which the government, encouraged and indeed ordered public officials to violate human rights. President Trump's capture of Nicolas Maduro and subsequent engagement have made great strides in reversing this vile status quo. However, there is undoubtedly more progress needed, as any reasonable person should expect given not only the decades long decay of institutions, but also the limits of U.S. power to enact a rapid transformation in a foreign country.

Maduro's Venezuela became one of the world's worst examples of human rights abuses, widespread poverty, and crimes against humanity almost as soon as Maduro took power in 2013. The near-immediate decline in GDP per capita after Maduro took power exacerbated the deplorable conditions left over from Hugo Chavez' regime—and it became clear that Maduro's government effectively used human rights abuses as a tool for political power.

Civil unrest in Venezuela in early 2014 alerted the United Nations and the Organization of American States to the despotism of Maduro's government. Protestors of Maduro's contested election were immediately met with state-sponsored repression, violence, and extra-judicial imprisonments. The UN and OAS condemned Venezuelan authorities and pro-government armed groups known as "colectivos" for violence against unarmed protestors of Maduro's government, while Human Rights Watch reported that peaceful protests of Maduro's regime led to at least violent nine killings by government personnel.<sup>5</sup> Maduro's detention system became a symbol of political terror, as prisoners detained arbitrarily after these early protests reported brutal beatings, threats of sexual violence, and even starvation in prison. Violence against protestors remained a hallmark of Maduro's abuses of the Venezuelan people throughout the succeeding decade. Maduro's 2024 election claim was once again widely disputed, and protestors were met with extreme violence. The OAS reported that at least 28 unarmed civilians were killed during the 2024 post-election protests. More than 2,400 people were detained within the first nine days of the protests, including at least 1,848 civilians, 252 women, and 162 children.<sup>6</sup> By February 2025, the OAS cited 1,196 political prisoners in Venezuela, including children, opposition figures, activists, and foreign nationals, often charged under vague offenses such as terrorism or "incitement to hatred."<sup>7</sup> Non-partisan human rights agencies were vocal about these abuses since the earliest days of Maduro's dictatorship; and eventually, it became clear that such repression of political dissent was a key element of Maduro's grasp for power.

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<sup>5</sup> [Punished for Protesting: Rights Violations in Venezuela's Streets, Detention Centers, and Justice System | HRW](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Report 2025.pdf](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Report 2025.pdf](#)

Beyond direct government violence against civilians, Maduro's regime permitted armed criminal groups to operate with near-total impunity across the country. In Venezuela's Apure state and even in neighboring regions, HRW found that ELN guerrillas and FARC dissident groups coerced civilians into forced labor, recruited children and killed those who disobeyed. HRW described impoverished victims living "in silence and fear" as armed groups operated with "close to absolute impunity."<sup>8</sup> In 2025 the U.S. Treasury Department designated the Cartel of the Suns as a foreign terrorist organization, alleging that Maduro and other high-ranking Venezuelan officials were in fact the leaders of the cartel. The Treasury Department declared that Maduro's cartel activity provided material support to Tren de Aragua and the Sinaloa Cartel, both entities that inflict horrific crimes against local peoples and have brought their networks into the U.S. as well.<sup>9</sup> Maduro criminalized his government, and used the violence and intimidation of criminal groups to punish dissenters into silence. The intense fear and social anguish experienced by the Venezuelan under this abuse led to an unprecedented amount of mass migration out of Venezuela in the last decade. HRW reported that roughly 8 million Venezuelans fled the country since 2014 in fear of Maduro's regime, making Venezuela one of the largest displacement crises in the world.<sup>10</sup>

Underlying political despotism also fueled Venezuela's staggering hunger crisis over the past decade — possibly the most egregious of Maduro's human rights abuses. Prior to Maduro's assumption of power, the average calorie intake and food availability for Venezuelan households was well above the average for other Latin American countries: in 2012, the average person consumed approximately 2,800 kilocalories each day. By 2019 Venezuela's GDP had fallen by more than half, and Harvard's Ricardo Haussman noted that the minimum wage could buy two eggs a day — roughly 700 calories, available to an entire household.<sup>11</sup> Human Rights Watch cited the 2017 National Living Conditions Survey, which found that the average adult in Venezuela reported weight loss of 11.4 kilograms, or nearly 25 pounds, over the course of a year. Children were hit especially hard: Human Rights Watch also noted acute malnutrition in children under the age of five rose 7% between 2017 and 2018.<sup>12</sup> By 2016, food imports had already fallen 71% from their 2013 peak, and imports of medicine and medical equipment had fallen 68%.<sup>13</sup> Health and nutrition indicators were devastating, even while government accountability completely halted. A Human Rights Watch and Johns Hopkins report found that Maduro's government stopped regular publication of health and nutrition data in 2015, and in 2017 fired its health minister after she attempted to bring alarming statistics to the world's attention.<sup>14</sup> Venezuela's

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<sup>8</sup> ["The Guerrillas Are the Police": Social Control and Abuses by Armed Groups in Colombia's Arauca Province and Venezuela's Apure State | HRW](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Treasury Sanctions Venezuelan Cartel Headed by Maduro | U.S. Department of the Treasury](#)

<sup>10</sup> [World Report 2026: Venezuela | Human Rights Watch](#)

<sup>11</sup> [Harvard expert tries to make sense of Venezuela's collapse — Harvard Gazette](#)

<sup>12</sup> [Venezuela's Humanitarian Emergency: Large-Scale UN Response Needed to Address Health and Food Crises | HRW](#)

<sup>13</sup> [Impact of the 2017 sanctions on Venezuela: Revisiting the evidence | Brookings](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Venezuela: Numbers Highlight Health Crisis | Human Rights Watch](#)

mass malnutrition and health crisis over the last decade were greatly exacerbated by Maduro's regime, and should be seen as the predictable result of socialist authoritarianism.

This is the backdrop against which one should assess the post-Maduro transition and impact of U.S. engagement. Human rights abuses and crimes against humanity under Maduro were among the worst our hemisphere has ever seen with Venezuela's public institutions directly implicated in weaponizing these abuses. While some may have hoped for rapid and total institutional transformation after Maduro's capture, such expectations assume a level of direct control by the U.S. that does not align with current realities. Nonetheless, the removal of Nicolas Maduro and subsequent engagement by the U.S. have brought about major changes and improvements for Venezuelan human rights since January.

### **Improvements in Human Rights since Maduro's Capture:**

In late January, Delcy Rodriguez announced an amnesty law under which El Helicoide, one of the Maduro government's most notorious detention sites where hundreds of political prisoners were detained and tortured, would be closed. Reports confirm that at least 600 political prisoners were released following this announcement, while the government claimed more than 600 people have been released in total.<sup>15</sup> Rodriguez's amnesty law was a significant development, as it acknowledged the existence of political prisoners that the Maduro government had consistently denied.

Public opinion polling also demonstrates significant improvements in Venezuelan quality of life, stability, and social sentiment. Particularly strong polling conducted through 1,000 face-to-face interviews in of this year showed that 72% of Venezuelans felt the country was moving in a positive direction, 92% of Venezuelans were grateful to President Trump for the removal of Nicolas Maduro and 90% supported the U.S. becoming Venezuela's primary ally. The same polling showed that many Venezuelans saw the regime's collapse as a rare opening after years of repression.<sup>16</sup> Overwhelming public support for such measures as the release of political prisoners, U.S. engagement to stopping drug flows, and concrete security benchmarks give most Venezuelans confidence that forthcoming democratic elections will bear integral results.

Another critical human rights achievement of the Trump administration's engagement is the ousting of foreign regimes that have enabled Venezuela's repressive apparatus, including Russia, China, and Cuba. Cuba in particular served as the key architect of the Maduro regime's repressive apparatus, with the Cuban dictatorship holding direct responsibility for much of Venezuela's atrocious human rights record over the preceding decades. Indeed, Cuba deploying thousands of agents to Venezuela to target opposition figures, and maintain control of the armed

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<sup>15</sup> [Venezuela's acting President Delcy Rodriguez announces prisoner amnesty | Prison News | Al Jazeera](#)

<sup>16</sup> [Venezuelans optimistic after US intervention, poll finds; Survey shows strong support for U.S. role in Venezuela after Maduro's removal - CBS Miami](#)

forces, and empower the Maduro regime. Cuban agents were even directly involved in the torture of political prisoners and opposition leaders in Venezuela.<sup>17</sup> Beyond this, Cuba also operated human trafficking rings and forced labor in Venezuela through its so called foreign medical missions, further eroding human rights realities in the Andean country. Thanks to the Trump Administration's actions and engagement, Cuban agents have effectively been ousted from Venezuela, removing a key pillar of the Maduro regime's repressive apparatus.<sup>18</sup>

Beyond this, there are also early signs of increased media freedom in the country that excite public confidence in the regime change. After Maduro's capture, Venezuela welcomed Newsmax as the some of the first foreign journalists allowed to report freely in the country in over a decade.<sup>19</sup> Opportunities for Venezuelan independent media have expanded as well, with The Knight Center's Journalism Review reporting that independent Venezuelan journalists were allowed to cover a presidential event at Miraflores Palace in 2026 for the first time in 10 years.<sup>20</sup> Overall, polling after Maduro's removal shows that Venezuelans believe the regime change created the first promising path forward available the country in years.

## **June 2026 Earthquake**

The June 2026 earthquake presented a major and tragic test for U.S. engagement in Venezuela. On one end, the scale of the tragedy reflected the underlying failures and corruption of Venezuela's corrupt socialist system under Hugo Chavez and Maduro. Indeed, rampant corruption and persistent economic crisis hollowed out emergency services and even construction activity and building repairs, leaving the country far more vulnerable to natural disasters like this.

However, thanks to proactive engagement from the Trump Administration, the United States has been able to respond to the recent earthquake and deploy critical, life-saving aid more assertively to the Venezuelan population. This response is being supported not only by U.S. government efforts but also by private and faith-based organizations, such as Samaritan's Purse, which are actively delivering resources and relief to affected communities

As of July 8, Reuters reported 3,811 deaths, 16,740 injuries, and 17,907 people left homeless.<sup>21</sup> The death toll is likely to rise, as tens of thousands of people remain missing. Reporting from the region of La Guaira described collapsed buildings, damaged water systems, outdoor shelters, and

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<sup>17</sup> [Agentes cubanos asisten a Maduro para torturar a los opositores](#)

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/venezuela/article314810061.html>

<sup>19</sup> [Venezuelan Shopkeeper to Newsmax: Optimistic for Change Since Maduro Capture | Newsmax.com](#)

<sup>20</sup> [Independent Venezuelan journalists allowed into presidential palace for first time in a decade - LatAm Journalism Review by the Knight Center](#)

<sup>21</sup> [Death toll from Venezuela quakes rises to 3,811 | Forth](#)

intense disease risks as well.<sup>22</sup> The extent of infrastructural damage from the earthquakes can be connected to Maduro-era institutional decay. One of the tragedies of Chavez/Maduro's narco-socialist reign in Venezuela is that rampant corruption and persistent economic crisis hollowed out emergency services and even construction activity and building repairs, leaving the country far more vulnerable to natural disasters like this. The scale of damage appears to have been worsened by years of bad governance, poor maintenance, weak oversight, corruption, and loss of technical capacity.<sup>23</sup> Reuters reported that engineers blamed decades of neglect, rushed government housing projects, soil instability, and the loss of engineering expertise for increasing the structural damage and the human casualties.<sup>24</sup> Local Venezuelan reporting made the same point: El País noted that Venezuela lacked financial, institutional, and human capacity after years of inflation, scarcity, migration, and state weakening, while Infobae reported that the quake exposed the fragility and poor construction quality of housing associated with the Gran Misión Vivienda program.<sup>25</sup>

Nonetheless, the Trump Administration's rapid and proactive response in offering disaster support to Venezuela showcases the radically transformed—and improved—bilateral relationship following the capture of Nicolas Maduro. Without President Trump's successful efforts of engagement with Venezuela, natural disasters like this earthquake might trigger massive migration flows. Instead, the Trump administration has taken swift action to stabilize Venezuela. Per the State Department, U.S. efforts include the provision of more than \$200 million in aid to trusted partner organizations, aerial surveys using military aircraft, the deployment of the USS Fort Lauderdale Amphibious Transport Dock to provide aid to affected areas of the Venezuelan coast, and more than 300 first responders from across the United States. Additionally, U.S. military personnel worked to quickly repair and reopen Simon Bolivar International Airport.<sup>26</sup> Our efforts, in conjunction with Venezuelan and international partners, demonstrate the Administration's firm commitment to the stability, security, and prosperity of the Venezuelan people. They also reflect the depth of cooperation possible with the post-Maduro regime.

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<sup>22</sup> [‘A war zone’: Venezuela aid workers fear health crisis after earthquakes | Earthquakes News | Al Jazeera](#)

<sup>23</sup> [Venezuela's earthquake exposed more than just fault lines](#)

<sup>24</sup> [The Construction Failures and Risky Geography Behind Venezuela's Quake Tragedy](#)

<sup>25</sup> [El costo de la reconstrucción tras los terremotos podría superar ampliamente los 37.000 millones de dólares, en una economía sin músculo financiero ni institucional para afrontarlo : Los terremotos impactan en los planes de reconstrucción económica en Venezuela | EL PAÍS América; El costo de la reconstrucción tras los terremotos podría superar ampliamente los 37.000 millones de dólares, en una economía sin músculo financiero ni institucional para afrontarlo : Los terremotos impactan en los planes de reconstrucción económica en Venezuela | EL PAÍS América](#)

<sup>26</sup> [Update on the Trump Administration's Robust and Rapid Delivery of Life-Saving U.S. Assistance to Venezuela - United States Department of State](#)