

Human Rights in Venezuela: Status and Opportunity

**Rep. Chris Smith, Co-Chairman
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
July 15, 2026**

For more than a quarter century, Venezuela has endured one of the gravest humanitarian and human rights crises in the history of our hemisphere. Many thousands have been killed by the Chavez-Maduro dictatorships: the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights documented almost 7,000 extrajudicial killings in 2018 and 2019 alone. Thousands have been tortured and imprisoned. Millions have fled—nearly 8 million displaced. Families have been torn apart by repression, violence, and economic collapse.

These horrors was driven, of course, by the Chavez and then, since 2013, Maduro dictatorships, which of course had a close political, ideological and military-intelligence partnership with Cuba. Chavez liked to call Castro his mentor and father figure, and for Maduro likewise Castro was “father,” “teacher,” and “comandante”. As in Cuba, in Venezuela a country rich in resources and educated hard-working people was reduced to an impoverished dictatorship by socialists who came to power under the slogan of “more democracy” – which in practice meant *zero democracy*.

This year marked a dramatic turning point. In January, Nicolás Maduro was arrested by U.S. forces, removed from power and brought to the United States to face justice. Vice President Delcy Rodríguez assumed acting leadership. This was not only a triumph for President Trump but remarkable progress for the people of Venezuela. As Andres Martinez-Fernandez testifies, “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.”

Yet whether this leads to genuine democratic recovery—or merely another chapter of struggle—remains an open question. It has not yet happened. Some prisoners have been released – but there are still many political prisoners. Whether Venezuela will become free and democratic depends on Venezuelans.

Before the arrest of Maduro, our government has tried to promote freedom through various approaches – diplomacy, pressure, sanctions. None were successful. As the country navigates this transition, our goal must remain supporting conditions for Venezuelans themselves to restore accountable government, independent institutions, and economic opportunity.

History shows that durable reform cannot be imposed from outside – but the U.S. can do much to help. Today, with a government in place with whom the administration has a working relationship, we can engage with them in support of stabilization and recovery, and of course we press for concrete reforms: dismantling repressive structures, ensuring political prisoners are fully freed without restrictions, advancing credible elections, and combating corruption and transnational crime.

Effective humanitarian response to the earthquakes—coordinating with faith-based groups, and local communities—demonstrates how partnership can save lives while respecting sovereignty.

We also need to learn from the errors of the Obama and Biden administrations, who attempted to impose narrow agendas on foreign countries by funding and empowering elite western NGOs – which were often resented by host countries. The Trump administration has learned the lesson of that mistake. And Secretary Rubio’s leadership has been remarkably effective. The U.S. will provide international support more wisely—humanitarian relief, technical assistance, anti-corruption efforts, and election assistance in which the U.S. government remains engaged, reins in elite NGO agendas, and focuses on supporting fair processes in Venezuela without privileging any parties or seeking to impose results.

I thank our witnesses and look forward to their testimony on the current status and the path forward.