

“America’s Crazy Path of Sanctions”: Congress Passes Venezuela Sanctions, Obama Expected to Sign

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Late on Wednesday the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill to introduce sanctions against Venezuela.

The bill was also passed by the Senate on Monday, and White House officials have indicated that President Barack Obama will sign the bill into law, although it was not specified when.

The Venezuelan Defense of Human Rights and Civil Society Act seeks to sanction high ranking Venezuelan officials accused of being responsible for human rights abuses during the opposition unrest movement earlier this year. Primarily, it will sanction such officials with a visa ban and a freeze on any U.S. assets they possess.

Democrat senator Robert Menendez, the Act’s main sponsor, said of the bill’s passage that, “The absence of justice and the denial of human rights in Venezuela must end, and the U.S. Congress is playing a powerful part in righting this wrong”.

The Act also calls for a U.S. government strategy to increase funding for and availability of anti-government media in Venezuela, including utilizing the Voice of America for this end. The bill states that U.S. foreign policy should aim to “continue to support the development of democratic political processes and independent civil society in Venezuela”.

Investigative journalist Eva Golinger has [documented](#) how over the last twelve years U.S. government agencies have provided well over \$100 million to opposition groups in Venezuela for their activities.

The Venezuelan government rejects the Act’s narrative of the opposition’s unrest movement from February to May this year, which led to 43 deaths, including members of security forces and supporters of both sides. It states that the opposition was responsible for violence against civilians and public infrastructure, and that the unrest was aimed at provoking a state coup.

Officials also argue that members of security forces accused of abuses against opposition activists were investigated and detained.

Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro slammed the proposed sanctions yesterday, stating, “If the crazy path of sanctions is imposed, President Obama, I think you’re going to come out looking very bad...Who is the U.S. Senate to sanction the homeland of (independence

leader Simon) Bolivar?”

The U.S. bill comes on top of other sanctions imposed by the U.S. on Venezuela this year, namely a tightened restriction on “military end use” exports to the South American country in November, and the application of a visa ban on a group of unnamed Venezuelan officials by presidential order in July.

The sanctions policy stands at odds with the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, which have either backed Nicolas Maduro’s administration or have supported efforts to establish fresh dialogue between the government and opposition.

The Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), which counts Venezuela, Cuba, Ecuador and Nicaragua among its members, issued a statement on Thursday opposing the proposed U.S. sanctions.

“The countries of the ALBA wish to emphasise that they won’t allow the utilisation of old practices already applied in the region which are directed at fomenting a change in political regime. In this sense, we express our deepest support and solidarity with the people and government of Venezuela,” read the strongly worded statement.

The Venezuelan officials who would be sanctioned by the bill have not been named, however Republican senator Marco Rubio recently issued a [list](#) of 27 names he suggested should be included.

One of those on Rubio’s list is Jose Vielma Mora, the socialist party governor of Tachira state, which was one of the epicenters of the opposition’s militant street barricades during the unrest earlier this year.

“In some ways I’m happy to be on that list, because it means that I will become a Venezuelan patriot that defended peace and true democracy,” he said to local media in response to the news of the proposed sanctions.

The diplomatic pressure by the U.S. comes at a difficult economic moment for Venezuela, as a 38% fall in oil prices squeezes the country’s finances and compounds problems of product shortages and high inflation.

According to Bloomberg, Venezuelan bond prices have fallen to levels not seen in 16 years, while Wall Street estimates the probability of default at 93%.

In response to the high interest rates on borrowing this entails for Venezuela, Maduro said on Monday, “There is a financial blockade against Venezuela meant to impede our access to the financing we need to overcome the decrease in petroleum revenue”. He also denounced the “psychological and political” manipulation of Venezuela’s position in the global market.

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