

The Cruel Farce of U.S. Regime Change Policy in Venezuela

The use of broad sanctions against entire populations is inherently malign and must be brought to an end.

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The Biden administration is [continuing](#) the farce that is our government’s regime change policy in Venezuela:

The United States continues to recognize the authority of the democratically elected 2015 National Assembly as the last remaining democratic institution and **Juan Guaidó** as Venezuela’s interim president. We welcome the agreement reached to extend the authority of the National Assembly elected in 2015 and of interim President Guaidó as its president.

It was a mistake to recognize Guaidó when he had some fig leaf of legitimacy three years ago, but to continue the charade now several years later when he and his allies have even less influence and standing than they did before is truly absurd.

The chief problem with recognizing him as “interim” president then was that he had no effective control over the state he was supposedly leading. There was initially a belief among regime changers that defectors from the military would lend their support to the cause, but this never amounted to more than a trickle, and the few that threw in their lot with Guaidó were then left high and dry by the amateurish would-be coup attempt. Since then, the opposition has only lost ground. Fewer governments recognize Guaidó today than recognized him in 2019, and his approval rating in Venezuela is abysmally low. As **Francisco Rodriguez** [points out](#), the “interim” president has no real democratic or constitutional legitimacy:

Guaidó’s claim is tenuous both legally and politically. He has never won a national election, his term as legislator expired more than a year ago, and his poll numbers are as low as Maduro’s.

In addition to lacking legitimacy, he also lacks power inside the country. The military remains firmly on the side of Maduro and his allies. U.S. regime change policy has utterly failed to reach its goal, but it has still managed to inflict horrifying damage on the population. Rodriguez continues:

The central idea of this “maximum pressure” approach – implemented by Trump and Biden both through economic sanctions and by the transfer of control of Venezuelan government funds to Guaidó’s interim government – is that depriving the country of the funds needed to sustain its economy will bring about regime change. It hasn’t, and it won’t. It will simply contribute to worsening the country’s humanitarian crisis, fuel animosity toward the United States, deepen opposition divisions, and weaken civil society.

Rodriguez has authored a [new study](#) of the effects of U.S. sanctions on Venezuela’s economy, and his findings make for alarming reading:

I argue that U.S. economic sanctions toward Venezuela – which, in contrast to those of other nations, block the country’s access to export and financial markets – have played a crucial role in limiting the country’s access to foreign exchange, **contributing to a collapse of 72 percent in the country’s per capita income – the equivalent of four Great Depressions and the largest contraction ever documented in Latin America** [bold mine-DL]. Aggregate data show that oil production contracted after every U.S. decision to tighten sanctions, while detailed analysis of the evolution over time of output of oil-producing firms shows that companies with access to credit prior to sanctions suffered disproportionately from U.S. executive orders barring access to capital markets. According to econometric estimates presented in the study, U.S. sanctions are responsible for at least half of the decline in Venezuela’s oil production since 2017, depriving the country of the foreign currency revenue needed to import essential goods and sustain its economy.

He rightly condemns this sanctions policy, which he likens to siege warfare and the use of starvation as a weapon. As I have argued many times before, subjecting an entire country to economic warfare amounts to collective punishment of the people for the actions of their leaders. It is immoral and unjust, and it is all the more so because it is completely useless in delivering the political change that it is supposed to cause. According to the crude thinking of regime changers, impoverishing people and destroying their economy should make them rise up against their government, but we know from past and current examples that authoritarian leaders exploit the deprivation created by sanctions to tighten their control. Rodriguez notes later in his article, “An extensive literature [demonstrates](#) that sanctions are rarely effective in achieving regime change, and often end up making the target regimes stronger.” Meanwhile, the people are ground down deeper into want and misery so that they are preoccupied with meeting basic needs and surviving. No one has ever been liberated by mass starvation.

As Rodriguez says, “The deliberate targeting of civilian populations should have no place in the foreign policy of a civilized nation.” We should abhor using sanctions to attack innocent people just as we ought to abhor indiscriminate bombing and torture. Like those other crimes, collective punishment through sanctions strikes at the weak and defenseless through the reckless use of power. The use of broad sanctions against entire populations is inherently malign and must be brought to an end.

Rodriguez anticipates the objections of “maximum pressure” supporters and swats them aside:

Sanctions apologists have tried to muddy the discussion by arguing that it is Maduro and not sanctions that are to blame for Venezuela’s plight. This argument is fallacious and disingenuous. No serious scholarly work has ever tried to deny that Maduro’s policies contributed to the country’s economic crisis. The United States should be seeking to design policies that do not increase Venezuelans’ suffering, instead of just arguing that it is not causing as much damage as Maduro.

I would add that it is because Maduro had already done so much damage to Venezuela’s economy that the imposition of “maximum pressure” sanctions on the country was truly inexcusable. It is bad enough to impose broad sanctions on a country when it has been enjoying relatively good economic conditions. When it is already suffering from a massive economic and humanitarian crisis, as Venezuela was, it is imperative that our policy should do nothing to worsen the existing problems. Putting broad sanctions on Venezuela amounted to kicking the Venezuelan people when they were already down. Like other twisted sanctions policies, this one has been sold as “standing with” the people that it abuses. The people suffering from the sanctions are under no illusions about who is responsible for their added hardship, and they naturally oppose the policy that is strangling them. According to Rodriguez, “76 percent of Venezuelans oppose U.S. oil sanctions, while 53 percent have a negative view of Biden.”

Biden’s willingness to let this bankrupt and evil policy continue is a black mark on his record. This was a Trump-era policy that he inherited, so it would not have been that difficult for him to repudiate Trump’s policy at the beginning of his term. Whether because of inertia, political timidity, lack of imagination, or some combination of all three, Biden chose to keep the policy essentially unchanged. Cruel sanctions seem to be some of the only things that survive from one administration to the next. There is still time for Biden to change course, but judging from the administration’s latest endorsement of Guaidó he has no intention of doing that. It falls to members of Congress, activists, and the public to insist that the U.S. stop crushing the Venezuelan people with economic warfare.

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Featured image: The US government continues to view Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaido (left) as the rightful leader of Venezuela, not Nicolas Maduro (right). (Alexandros Michailidis/StringerAI/Shutterstock)

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