



## SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT: THE SITUATION IN VENEZUELA

H. Res. 488 & S. Res. 365

### U.S. Positions

On February 25, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) introduced House Resolution 488, “supporting the people of Venezuela as they protest peacefully for democracy, a reduction in violent crime and calling for an end to recent violence.”<sup>1</sup> The resolution passed by a large majority with bi-partisan support and the support of well known progressives on March 4.

On February 27, a very similar senate resolution which additionally called on President Barack Obama to sanction Venezuela (S. Res. 365) was introduced by Senator Robert Menendez (D-NJ) and was referred to the Committee on Foreign Relations where it was approved with bi-partisan support on March 11 and now awaits a full vote in the Senate.<sup>2</sup> Although a resolution expresses the sense or opinion of the Congress, if passed in both the House and the Senate and then combined into a joint or concurrent resolution, there is a possibility that the resolution could become law. Some members of Congress have indicated they will introduce new legislation that would force the President to use his executive authority to impose sanctions.

On Sunday, March 9, during a trip to Chile, Vice President Joseph Biden said that “the situation in Venezuela is alarming,” according to the Associated Press. Regurgitating biased claims that have been expressed in much of the international media and in Congress, he asserted that the Venezuelan government was “confronting peaceful protesters with force and in some cases with armed vigilantes; limiting the freedoms of press and assembly necessary for legitimate political debate; [and] demonizing and arresting political opponents; and dramatically tightening restrictions on the media.”<sup>3</sup>

Both the Obama administration and the U.S. Congress, along with major media outlets, continue to place all the blame on the Venezuelan government for the violence that has erupted within the last month. Early misrepresentations of widespread repression of protestors contributed to this narrative. However, evidence demonstrates that much of the violence has been perpetuated against government institutions and innocent civilians (both government and opposition supporters alike) by right wing thugs who are intent on destabilizing the country in order to illegally remove the democratically elected president.

### Myths in Congress vs. Facts in Venezuela

From the very beginning, the Maduro administration has called for peace, dialogue and stated that no parties shall face impunity, especially if it is found that any security forces have been involved, some of whom are already in custody and under investigation. In fact, on March 7, even the Organization of American States declared its “appreciation, full support, and encouragement for the initiatives and the efforts of the democratically-elected Government of Venezuela and all political, economic, and social sectors to continue to move forward with the process of national dialogue towards political and social reconciliation, in the framework of full respect by all democratic actors for the constitutional guarantees of all.”<sup>4</sup>

OAS: “*appreciation, full support and encouragement for the initiatives and the efforts of the democratically-elected government of Venezuela...*”

Given the immense amount of inaccurate information circulating regarding the current situation in Venezuela, we provide you with just a few of the most egregious statements put forward as truth in the Senate resolution (S. Res. 365), and the facts that refute them.

**Myth:** “...on January 23, 2014, National Representative Maria Corina Machado and Mr. Leopoldo Lopez, leader of the political party “Popular Will”, among others, called on the Venezuelan people to gather in street assemblies and debate a popular, democratic and constitutional “way out” of Venezuela’s crisis of governability”

**Fact:** It strains credulity to think that these “gatherings” and “debate” are aimed at finding a constitutional path. Right wing opposition leaders have called for the ouster of then-President Hugo Chávez by illegal means for more than a decade. Given that both Machado and López were integral supporters of the 2002 coup d’état that briefly unseated President Chávez, and that just last year, both supported calls made by opposition presidential candidate Henrique Capriles to not accept the results of the elections and mobilize in the streets—actions that resulted in eight deaths and 63 wounded—it is not difficult to believe that they would advocate for similarly unconstitutional means this time around.<sup>5</sup>

This is only underscored by the fact that a constitutional path for revoking a presidency already exists. Venezuela is one of the few, if not the only, countries in the world that allows for a presidential recall referendum (an initiative spurred by the late President Chávez and approved by popular vote in the 1999 constitutional referendum). The Constitution states that a President can be recalled through popular vote midway through his or her term. President Maduro could face a recall referendum as early as 2016, and along with the presidential elections of 2019, those are the only ways to bring about a constitutional change in the executive.

**Myth:** *“...since February 4, 2014, the people of Venezuela--responding to ongoing economic hardship, high levels of crime and violence, and the lack of basic political rights and individual freedoms--have turned out in demonstrations in Caracas and throughout the country to protest the Government of Venezuela's inability to ensure the political and economic well-being of its citizens”*

**Fact:** The people of Venezuela have never before seen so much democracy, equality and individual economic well-being since its founding as an independent nation more than 200 hundred years ago. The citizenry's rights to democracy and political participation have been ensured and encouraged with no less than 19 elections in the last decade and voter participation rates (in a country where voting is not mandatory) of about 80 percent during the last presidential election and 60 percent at the municipal level.<sup>6</sup> Institutions like the Citizens Branch of government and the establishment of communal councils nation-wide make Venezuela a pioneer in expanding political rights under the framework of a participatory democracy. In terms of economic well-being, the government continues to install methods to ensure the economic rights of all of its citizens, such as this year's Law of Fair Prices, and the many social mission programs that have resulted in free and improved access to education and health care, as well as a reduction in poverty by more than 50 percent.<sup>7</sup>

**Myth:** *“... the government of Nicolas Maduro responded to the mass demonstrations by ordering the arrest without evidence of senior opposition leaders, including Mr. Leopoldo Lopez, Carlos Vecchio, and Antonio Rivero, and by violently repressing peaceful demonstrators with the help of the Venezuelan National Guard and groups of armed, government-affiliated civilians, known as ‘collectives”*

**Fact:** The current protests began in San Cristóbal, in the state of Táchira, after a group of violent protestors were arrested outside of the Governor's residence as they were threatening his family and those inside the house with violence on February 6.<sup>8</sup> From there, right wing leaders called on the opposition to take to the streets in Caracas and around the country on February 12, Venezuela's Day of Youth, to march to the Office of the Attorney General to deliver a document about the earlier arrests in San Cristóbal. When Luisa Ortega Díaz, the Attorney General, announced that she was open to speaking to them and hearing their complaints, the opposition leaders refused and began to launch slurs against her to the crowd. As the march arrived at her office, masked and hooded men with backpacks began to attack the building and the National Police, who were there to provide safety to the protestors on their route. Stones and homemade weapons were used against the National Police. This resulted in two people dead, one of whom was a leader of a pro-government collective, and 23 injured. Property damages included five patrol cars of the CICPC (Scientific, Penal and Criminalistic Research Corps) being destroyed and set on fire.

Regarding legal proceedings against individuals, the Office of the Attorney General has presented sufficient evidence to issue arrest warrants or in some cases detain, pending further investigation, opposition leaders accused of promoting violence. All involved have received their rights to due process. Moreover, it should be noted that the Attorney General is part of the Citizens Branch of government and is directly elected by the National Assembly. This office is not in the “government of Nicolás Maduro” any more than Congressional democrats are in the Barack Obama administration.

### **The So-Called “Peaceful” Protests**

From that initial protest in Táchira, extreme right-wing groups in municipalities governed by the opposition in the east of Caracas, Valencia, San Cristóbal, Lecherías and Altos Mirandinos began blocking streets with barricades and using other dangerous tactics that have resulted in the direct and indirect deaths of innocent citizens. The barricades have caused significant vandalism and losses to private and public property. They have also resulted in deaths due to the inability of citizens and ambulances to pass through the road blocks in route to medical facilities and hospitals.<sup>9</sup>

**Barricades and other dangerous tactics from extremist right-wing groups have resulted in deaths of innocent civilians.**

This all comes in addition to government buildings being attacked, buses burned, social missions vandalized, Venezuela's state media being continuously encircled by mobs and innocent pedestrians being shot and killed while

trying to dismantle road barricades. A National Guardsman was also killed in this manner.

In an incident that has gone largely unreported in the international media, retired right wing general and opposition supporter, Angel Vivas, tweeted instructions on February 20 on how to set up wire on the streets in order to stop motorcycle riders (often seen as less upwardly mobile and thus aligned with the government), resulting in the deaths of two people, one of which is being referred to as a decapitation.<sup>10</sup> He tweeted: "In order to neutralize criminal hordes on motorbikes, one must place nylon string or galvanized wire across the street, at a height of 1.2 meters."<sup>11</sup>

A report recently released by the Attorney General indicates there are currently 27 investigations into human rights violations, including those allegedly committed by Venezuelan security forces in incidents that were immediately denounced by the President when it became clear that some violated his orders to stay off the streets during the protests. However, of the 21 deaths in total which have occurred since the protests began, many of the victims were not opposition protestors, but rather Venezuelan citizens and even foreigners trying to get to work and continue on with their daily lives.<sup>12</sup>

President Maduro immediately denounced incidents where security forces were implicated in human rights violations

Referring to the recent death of a Chilean student, Governor Alexis Ramírez told Reuters, "She was ambushed by extreme right-wing groups ... She was vilely murdered with a shot in the eye," said the governor of Mérida state who blamed the killing on "unidentified demonstrators in the Andean city."<sup>13</sup> Ten of these individuals were killed at opposition roadblocks. To date, the Attorney General has provided reports and updates on the ongoing investigations into potential human rights abuses, including those of the 18 Venezuelan security force members who have been arrested and are under investigation, a fact that is hardly ever mentioned in Congress or by the media. "Of the 1,322 people who have gone before the courts, 1,103 were issued precautionary measures, 92 were incarcerated and 35 were given full freedom," stated the Attorney General on March 6.<sup>14</sup> Of the 318 who have been injured, 237 are civilians and 81 are police and military officials.

[Chilean student] was ambushed by extreme right-wing groups... She was vilely murdered with a shot in the eye."

## Sources

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