

# Who are Obama and the US Congress to sanction Venezuela?

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In the midst of the deepening crisis in Washington over the Senate report revealing criminal acts of CIA torture, the Obama administration has decided to sanction Venezuelan officials for alleged human rights abuses.

The Obama White House made it known this week that the president was prepared to sign into law the “Venezuela Defense of Human Rights and Civil Society Act,” which was passed without opposition Wednesday by the US House of Representatives, two days after a similar vote in the Senate.

The legislation asserts that Washington “aspires to a mutually beneficial relationship with Venezuela based on respect for human rights and the rule of law and a functional and productive relationship on issues of public security,” while claiming that the US “supports the people of Venezuela in their efforts to realize their full economic potential and to advance representative democracy, human rights, and the rule of law within their country.”

It charges the government of President Nicolas Maduro with committing “human rights abuses” in confronting violent right-wing anti-government protests that began last February in which at least 43 people died and over 800 were injured. These included members of the security forces and supporters of the government.

The law imposes sanctions including barring officials from obtaining visas or entering the US and freezing all assets that they may have in the US. Those named include four state governors, the country’s chief federal prosecutor, the ministers of interior and defense and a number of officers in the military and police.

After the bill’s passage, its chief Democratic sponsor in the Senate, Robert Menendez, who chairs the Senate Foreign Relations committee, issued a statement

reading: “We in the United States have an obligation to shine a bright spotlight on Venezuela’s abuses and must object to severe human rights violations committed by the Maduro government and his paramilitary thugs. ... Our fight to deliver hope and renewed opportunity to Venezuela has only begun.”

The first obvious question raised by such remarks is: “Who the hell are the US Congress and the Obama administration to lecture anyone on alleged human rights violations?”

Between the Senate’s passage of the bill on Monday and the House vote to approve it on Wednesday, the Senate Intelligence Committee released the long-delayed summary of its report detailing horrific forms of torture, sexual sadism and brutality meted out by CIA interrogators against detainees who were abducted and held without charges. It is acknowledged that these practices, war crimes under international law, were carried out under the direct orders and supervision of then US President George W. Bush and other top officials.

The Obama administration, which refuses to bring charges against anyone connected with the affair and defends the CIA and its interrogators, is fully complicit in these crimes—and worse. It has gone even further than the Bush administration, carrying out drone murders and massacres—including against US citizens—that have claimed the lives of thousands, while conducting massive spying on the people of the US and the entire planet.

One of the charges made in the anti-Venezuelan legislation is that “not a single member of the public security forces of the Government of Venezuela had been held accountable for acts of violence perpetrated against antigovernment protesters.”

Again, who is Washington to talk? Not only has not a

single member of the CIA been held accountable for the crime of torture, police in a series of shocking murders of unarmed individuals, including Ferguson, Missouri teenager Michael Brown and Eric Garner of Staten Island, New York, have not even been brought to trial. This is not to mention the disproportionate violence unleashed against protesters in the US, from the mass arrests and violence against Occupy Wall Street demonstrators to the recent use of militarized police against protesters in Ferguson.

What of Washington's claims of commitment to furthering "democracy" and the "rule of law" in Venezuela? The real story is that the demonstrations organized last February were aimed at overturning the results of not just one, but two elections. The first, in April 2013, saw Nicolas Maduro, who succeeded the late Hugo Chavez as president, narrowly win election to the presidency in his own right. The second, municipal elections held in December 2013, were cast by Maduro's right-wing opposition as a referendum on his government. Instead of producing the results desired by the right and its US patrons, however, candidates of the ruling party won 70 percent of the races.

This is what led the most hardline, semi-fascist layers within the opposition MUD (Democratic Unity Roundtable) to organize the violent protests in February under the slogan *la salida* (the exit) and with the open aim of deposing the elected government. In this respect, the campaign bore much in common with the violent upheavals orchestrated by Washington and its allies in Ukraine, though it failed to achieve the goal of regime change.

This is by no means the first time that the US has sought to violently overthrow the Venezuelan government. In April 2002, the CIA backed a coup by sections of the military and big business that succeeded in briefly imprisoning then President Chavez before he was restored to power by mass protests in Caracas.

The principal organizers of the recent violent right-wing protests—figures such as Leopoldo Lopez and María Corina Machado—have been the recipients of generous funding from Washington, which has poured an estimated \$100 million into opposition coffers since 2002 through such US agencies as the National Endowment for Democracy and the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

In March of this year, the US was the only member of the Organization of American States to refuse to sign a declaration affirming "respect for the principle of nonintervention in the domestic affairs of states and its commitment to the protection of democratic institutions and the rule of law, in accordance with the OAS Charter and international law." It stands equally alone in the hemisphere in support for sanctions.

The aim of the Obama administration and Congress is not furthering "democracy" and "human rights" in Venezuela, but rather installing a more pliant regime that will be even more subordinate to Wall Street and the US oil conglomerates.

It is noteworthy that the sanctions legislation concerns itself solely with the fate of Washington's right-wing agents in Venezuela. It makes no mention of militant workers who have been imprisoned or seen their strikes and protests suppressed by the Chavez and Maduro governments. That kind of repression it fully supports, and any new regime brought to power with US backing will turn even more savagely against the working class.

The US sanctions legislation is deserving only of contempt. The task of settling accounts with the Maduro government and Venezuela's present ruling establishment is that of the Venezuelan working class, not the "human rights" hypocrites in Washington.



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