

Washington Sanctioning the World: US Government Threatens Sanctions against Venezuelan Officials

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Members of Congress and the Obama administration have consistently placed the blame for the violence stemming from protests on the Venezuelan government, while overlooking or ignoring violent incidents by opposition protesters, including the decapitation of motorcycle riders, the burning of government buildings and metro stations, attacks against state media companies, and the killing of individuals seeking to dismantle barricades, including a National Guard officer. Officials have referred instead to “systematic” human rights abuses and government repression, without citing evidence.

Based on these assertions, momentum is building to implement sanctions on members of the Venezuelan government. U.S. Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-FL) [told the press](#) on Monday that, “There should be sanctions on individuals. ... The administration is looking at those.” Wasserman Schultz, the Democratic National Committee chairwoman, cited a “high-level” State Department official that she had recently spoken to.

That the administration is considering sanctions comes on the heels of demands from members of congress that the Obama administration go further in its application of pressure on the Venezuelan government. After introducing legislation “supporting the people of Venezuela as they protest peacefully for democracy,” Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) [stated that](#):

“But this resolution can only be the first step to hold Maduro and his fellow regime thugs accountable for their violent response and their abuses of the Venezuelan people’s liberties and human rights. I have already begun circulating a letter amongst my colleagues in the House, addressed to President Obama, asking him to take immediate actions against Maduro and other Venezuelan officials who are responsible for violations of their people’s human rights. We are calling for the President to enact immediate sanctions against these officials, under authorities granted to him under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA), including denying them visas to enter the United States, blocking their property and freezing their assets in the U.S., as well as prohibiting them from making any financial transactions in the U.S.”

Ros-Lehtinen also plans to introduce a bill that would require the administration to take these steps. The moves from the House of Representatives have been echoed in the Senate, where the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Menendez (D-NJ) and U.S. Senators Marco Rubio (R-FL), Dick Durbin (D-IL) and [Ted Cruz](#) (R-TX) have [introduced a](#) resolution calling for sanctions. Menendez stated:

“Now is the time to pursue a course of targeted sanctions by denying and revoking visas, and freezing the assets of Venezuelan officials complicit in the deaths of peaceful protestors. Human rights violators should be held accountable for the crimes they committed and their presence should not be welcome in our nation. Venezuelans today are denied basic rights, freedoms, and the ability to peacefully protest the dire economic circumstances caused by President Maduro and his government. We stand with the Venezuelan people and the brave opposition leaders in their pursuit to build a more hopeful Venezuela that embraces a bright future while discarding a failed past.”

Marco Rubio even made the case for sanctions on NBC News’ “Meet The Press,” [telling host](#) David Gregory that, “I would like to see specific U.S. sanctions against individuals in the Maduro government that are systematically participating in the violation of human rights and anti-democratic actions.” Florida Governor Rick Scott has [also called](#) for sanctions. Although neither the House nor the Senate have passed these resolutions calling for sanctions, Secretary of State John Kerry [told reporters](#) last week that, “with respect to Venezuela, Congress has urged sanctions.”

The call for sanctions has also been trumpeted by the press, with *Miami Herald* columnist Andres Oppenheimer [saying that](#) if Venezuela does not respond to “international diplomatic pressures,” then the Congress “should revoke the U.S. visas of Venezuelan government and military leaders.” Further, Otto Reich, the former U.S. Ambassador to Venezuela and Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs at the time of the U.S.-backed coup of 2002, wrote an opinion piece [for the National Review](#) titled “It’s Time for Sanctions in Venezuela.”

None of the members of congress nor any of the resolutions mention the fact that of the 18 tragic deaths in Venezuela since the protests began, many were not protestors, but individuals removing barricades and motorcyclists killed by wires strung across streets, or by crashing into barricades. In one case, a member of the Venezuelan National Guard was shot and killed. The Senate resolution makes no call for both sides to refrain from violence nor does it condemn the violent actions of some from the protest movement, however it does deplore “the use of excessive and unlawful force against peaceful demonstrators in Venezuela and the inexcusable use of violence...to intimidate the country’s political opposition.”

While, undoubtedly, excessive force has been used by members of the Venezuelan security forces, over 10 individuals have been arrested for these actions and further investigations are under way. [According to the Attorney General](#) (AG) of Venezuela, there are currently 27 investigations into violations of human rights. The AG, Luisa Ortega Diaz, stated that her office “will not tolerate violations of human rights under any circumstance and that any official turns out to be responsible will be sanctioned as established by the laws of Venezuela.” Far from censoring information or trying to hide the extent of the arrests or of those killed in the last few weeks, Diaz has provided [regular updates to the press](#) and has kept the public informed about the status of investigations.

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