

Rex Alex

Researched Argument

Word Count: 1481

4/18/21

Venezuela and the Sanctions Controversy

"They don't care. They think they are hurting President Maduro, but they're really hurting the people." These are the words of Carolina Subero, a Venezuelan citizen who is watching her nation fall apart and blames the United States for it (Venezuelans Hit Hard). One may wonder, why would she blame them, after all, the people of the United States are the good guys right? Well the United States of America has been imposing sanctions on Venezuela since 2015 in hopes that it would pressure Venezuela's allegedly anti-democratic and dictatorial president, Nicholas Maduro, to resign and thus save the Venezuelan people. Yet seven years later he is still firmly in power and people like Subero continue to suffer. Thus the United States' strategy of placing economic sanctions on this developing country has come to be questioned. Concerns about the effectiveness, legality, and morality of these sanctions have entered into the public debate on this issue. Upon conducting extensive research into this controversy, it becomes evident that the United States' current strategy of placing broad economic sanctions on Venezuela is ineffective at achieving its goal, is illegal according to international law, is worsening the lives of the Venezuelan people, and should thus be reformed.

It is reasonable to claim that economic sanctions from the United States have not succeeded in pressuring Nicholas Maduro to step down as president of Venezuela because after seven years of sanctions, including five years of sectoral sanctions on Venezuela's oil industry, Maduro remains in power. In fact, numerous studies have presented evidence that sanctions in

general are not an effective foreign policy tool. This includes a study from Stanford University which shows that from 1914 to 1990, economic sanctions were only effective in five out the one-hundred and fifteen cases and that fifty-two percent of sanctions caused further destabilization in the regions on which they were imposed (Pape 1997). This historical evidence further proves that sanctions have always been ineffective at causing positive change in a country so it should come as no surprise that the ones placed on Venezuela are just as useless.

Furthermore, evidence reveals that sanctions from the United States have backfired on their intended goal of forcing Maduro to resign. For example, according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, “68 percent of Venezuelans believe that U.S. sanctions have worsened their quality of life” and Maduro has used these sanctions to legitimize his *Hands off Venezuela* propaganda campaign (Rendon 2019). Thus, the sanctions from the United States have helped Maduro avoid accountability for the dire conditions of his citizens and has even helped legitimize him as an anti-imperialist leader, which is the complete opposite of what the United States intended to accomplish.

Another concern raised is that the way in which the United States is imposing sanctions on Venezuela is not entirely legal according to international law. For example, before imposing economic sanctions a country is supposed to bring the case before the Dispute Settlement Body of the World Trade Organization and receive their permission before moving forward. However, according to an analysis from the University of Pennsylvania, “the United States did not follow this process and instead unilaterally imposed economic sanctions on Venezuela” (Blomburg 2019). So the United States plans to rely on the “Security Exception” loophole to argue that the sanctions on Venezuela were necessary to maintain peace in the United States. Yet even this argument is on shaky ground as “the crisis in Venezuela is neither occurring in the immediate

surroundings of the United States nor triggering a breakdown of law and public order in the United States or its immediate surroundings. Moreover, the United States is not currently engaged in an armed conflict with Venezuela" (Blomberg 2019). So considering that the United States is bypassing international legal processes and relying on flimsy loopholes to justify itself, it is reasonable to assert that the economic sanctions are a violation of international law and should thus be reformed.

Furthermore, The broad sanctions placed on Venezuela have worsened the humanitarian and refugee crisis there. Evidence for this claim can be found when analyzing the impact of the August 2017 sectoral sanctions imposed on Venezuela's economy. For example, a study from the Center for Economic and Policy Research found that the 2017 sanctions crippled Venezuela's already struggling oil industry and led to a loss of six billion dollars(Weisbrot & Sachs 2019). The same study explains that they are reliant on the revenue from oil exports to import necessities like medicine and food and that therefore "any sanctions that reduce export earnings, and therefore government revenue, thereby reduce the imports of these essential and, in many cases, life-saving goods"(Weisbrot & Sachs 2019). More economic sanction from the United States in 2019 led to a "devastating 36.4 percent plunge in oil production" and "froze many billions of dollars of Venezuelan assets that could have been sold in order to maintain essential and life-saving imports, or to stabilize the economy" (Weisbrot and Sachs 2019). In other words, by limiting their oil exports and freezing their assets, the United States also limited the amount of food, medicine, water system repair equipment and other necessities that the Venezuelan government could import, thus exacerbating an ongoing crisis. Furthermore, a study from the University at Albany shows that the amount of migrants looking to escape Venezuela's humanitarian crisis skyrocketed in 2017 as the United States imposed broad sanctions on the

country. Thus, by worsening the living conditions in Venezuela, the sanctions also caused a refugee crisis which has brought instability not only to Venezuela but also to Colombia which has taken in scores of refugees (Lopez 2019). These sources prove that broad economic sanctions from the United States are worsening the lives of Venezuelans and should be reformed.

A common counterargument used to absolve the United States of any blame pertaining to Venezuela's crisis is the suggestion that the crisis started long before the sectoral sanctions were imposed, thus the Venezuelan government should be blamed and not the foreign policy of the United States. However, this argument is inaccurate and dishonest. Although the corruption and incompetence of the Maduro regime started this crisis, a study from economist Luis Oliveros shows that “since August 2017, the average monthly production of Venezuelan oil has fallen almost 5 times faster than during the pre-sanctions period”(Oliveros 2020). Furthermore, it is inaccurate to say that the issues in Venezuela began long before the sanctions because under Hugo Chavez, Venezuela's quality of life improved at the “third fastest rate worldwide” (Devereux & Colitt 2013). He passed away in 2013 as global oil prices crashed in 2014 which led to the collapse of the Venezuelan economy. In other words, the fall of Venezuela correlates directly with the fall of their oil production which was made worse by sanctions.

Although Nicholas Maduro is a dangerous and anti-democratic leader, crippling the Venezuelan economy through years of sanctions has proven to be a disastrous strategy. It has empowered Maduro among his supporters, it is an illegal method of economic action under international law, and it has worsened the humanitarian and refugee crisis in Venezuela. The United States should immediately seek to reform their foreign policy on this matter by either combining the sanctions with a plan to send aid to Venezuelans or by going back to placing

targeted sanctions on government officials only. Reform must happen for the sake of integrity, the future of Venezuela and for the lives of Venezuelan people.

Works Cited

- Alexander, Joel. "Venezuelan Refugee Crisis: A Consequence of U.S. Economic Sanctions." *Scholarsarchive.Library.Albany.Edu*, University at Albany, State University of New York, 2019,
scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1016&context=lacs_honors. Accessed 19 Apr. 2021
- Blomburg, Jon. "Sanctions in Venezuela: An Improper Mechanism to Effectuate Change." *Www.Law.Upenn.Edu*, 20 Dec. 2019,
www.law.upenn.edu/live/news/9649-sanctions-in-venezuela-an-improper-mechanism-to. Accessed 17 Apr. 2021
- "Venezuelans Hit Hard by International Sanctions." *DW.COM*,
www.dw.com/en/the-human-cost-of-the-us-sanctions-on-venezuela/a-50647399. Accessed 19 Apr. 2021.
- Devereux, Charlie, and Raymond Colitt. "Venezuelans' Quality of Life Improved in UN Index Under Chavez." *Bloomberg.Com*, 7 Mar. 2013,
www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-03-07/venezuelans-quality-of-life-improved-in-un-index-under-chavez. Accessed 17 Apr. 2021
- Oliveros, Luis. "The Impact of Financial and Oil Sanctions on the Venezuelan Economy." *Wola.Org*, Oct. 2020,
www.wola.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Oliveros-report-summary-ENG.pdf. Accessed 17 Apr. 2021

Pape, Robert A. “Why Economic Sanctions Do Not Work.” *International Security*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1997, pp. 90–136. *Crossref*, doi:10.1162/isec.22.2.90.

Rendon, Moises. “Are Sanctions Working in Venezuela?” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 3 Sept. 2019, www.csis.org/analysis/are-sanctions-working-venezuela. Accessed 18 Apr. 2021

Weisbrot, Mark, and Jeffrey Sachs. “Economic Sanctions as Collective Punishment: The Case of Venezuela.” *Cepr.Net*, Center for Economic and Policy Research, Apr. 2019, cepr.net/images/stories/reports/venezuela-sanctions-2019-04.pdf. Accessed 19 Apr. 2021