

**REMARKS ON VENEZUELA LEGISLATION FOR HFAC MEMBER DAY**  
**Rep. Wasserman Schultz | Nov. 3, 2023 at 11:00am (5 minutes)**

I thank Chairman McCaul and Ranking Member Meeks for the opportunity to testify today and amplify the voices of my Venezuelan American constituents.

As co-chair of the Congressional Venezuela Democracy Caucus, I urge my colleagues to join me in support of the *AFFECT Human Rights in Venezuela Act* and the *VOICE Act*.

Venezuela has suffered a lost decade under the dictatorial rule of Nicolas Maduro.

Nearly eight million Venezuelans have fled their homes – a third of the nation’s 2014 population. Countless others have been displaced internally by state-backed illegal mining and violent drug cartels.

Maduro’s autocratic regime has systematically destroyed judicial and electoral independence, hijacking the institutions of the state to repress dissent and draining the country’s wealth for personal gain.

Once he succeeded in stealing everything his people had, including their votes, he sold access and allegiance to the world’s cruelest tyrannies – Russia, China, Iran, Cuba – who now provide the resources to prop up his regime.

The independent international Fact-Finding Mission on Venezuela has documented Maduro and his cronies’ flagrant violation of human rights and crimes against humanity: torture, political imprisonment, surveillance, extrajudicial murder, environmental terrorism, and countless other charges.

While I am grateful for President Biden's moral clarity and resolve in his efforts to promote a peaceful and democratic transfer of power, we must consider how to address these unforgiveable abuses of power. The time is now to plan for a day after.

That starts with ensuring that the Fact-Finding Mission and other international judicial mechanisms have unceasing support from the United States and other Western Hemisphere democracies.

I was proud to re-introduce the *AFFECT Human Rights in Venezuela Act* for this very purpose, alongside three distinguished members of this committee: Joaquin Castro, Maria Salazar, and Mike Waltz.

This bipartisan bill, which advanced out of committee unanimously last Congress, also provides for enhanced cooperation between the U.S., intergovernmental institutions, and human rights organizations to ensure that humanitarian assistance reaches those in need, whether they are residing in Venezuela or third countries like Colombia.

Finally, it opens new pathways for promoting independent media, protecting human rights, and negotiating for the release of political prisoners and wrongfully detained Americans.

I urge the Chairman and Ranking Member to mark up this legislation and report it to the House floor, where I am confident it will be met with bipartisan support.

Despite the ruthless efforts of the Maduro regime, Venezuela's democratic opposition has found new purpose and unity with the support of the Biden Administration.

In addition to securing an agreement that allowed over \$3 billion in humanitarian aid to be distributed to Venezuelans, without being channeled through the regime, President Biden has been clear that sanctions on Venezuela's captors will only be lifted if the regime allows free elections, releases prisoners, and respects human rights.

The opposition overcame significant obstacles to organize an independent presidential primary election, mobilizing more than 2.3 million voters, a landmark accomplishment.

This election resulted in the nomination of Maria Corina Machado, a fierce champion for human rights who has unified and galvanized Venezuela's democratic movement.

This week, I spoke with Ms. Machado to congratulate her on this achievement and promised that the campaign for democracy would continue to enjoy bipartisan support in Congress.

However, the Maduro regime has decided that Ms. Machado should not be allowed to run, the will of the people be damned.

Worse yet, following her overwhelming victory in the primary, the regime's kangaroo court affirmed her baseless disqualification and suspended the election results.

The criminalization of this legitimate political process, which was coordinated in compliance with international norms, reflects a well-established pattern of disdain for genuine electoral independence and repression of political opponents.

The court's requirement that the independent National Primary Commission turn over documents identifying Venezuelan voters is

especially grave, considering the regime's history of retaliating against dissent through intimidation and denial of social services.

As the representative of a large Venezuelan American community, I am horrified by the prospect that my constituents who participated in the primary vote could become targets of the regime.

I foresaw this outcome when I introduced the *VOICE Act* with Congresswoman Salazar. This legislation draws a red line when it comes to Maduro's desperate attempts to cling to power by disenfranchising his opponents.

The *VOICE Act* expresses the consensus of Congress that the Venezuelan people deserve support in their efforts to advance democracy and use peaceful, electoral methods to achieve their goals.

It takes direct aim at those who are enabling Maduro's tyranny by blocking assets and U.S. visas for those who are complicit in excluding Ms. Machado from the election and delegitimizing the democratic opposition.

My bill lays out clear conditions for what a resolution of the crisis looks like – and lays out clear actions to achieve them, along with our allies and partners in the region.

It also prescribes a broader U.S. role in the region, including a new special envoy to coordinate Venezuela policy, preserve humanitarian access and free press, oversee political negotiations, and get detained Americans like Eyvin Hernandez home.

The situation in Venezuela is dire. But Venezuelans are strong.

Two weeks ago, I stood alongside tens of thousands of constituents who lined up to participate in the opposition primary. From Austin, to Manhattan, to Broward County, Venezuelans stood in solidarity, some in joyful tears, to cast their ballots.

They told the dictator and his criminal cronies: you may have taken our homes, our livelihoods, and our freedoms, but you will not take away our voice.

So join me in support of the *VOICE Act* and the *AFFECT Human Rights in Venezuela Act* to bring Venezuela's lost decade to an end, and initiate a new era of prosperity, democracy, and hope.

Thank you, and I yield back.