

Ousting Maduro from Venezuela without violence appears unlikely, experts say

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Miamiherald, February 04, 2019

The pressure is building on Nicolás Maduro.

A host of European countries recognized Juan Guaidó as Venezuela's president on Monday, after Maduro predictably failed to meet their eight-day deadline to schedule free and fair elections. President Donald Trump and congressional leaders say all options are on the table. And recently announced [U.S. oil sanctions](#) will begin to take effect in the coming weeks as the international community attempts to send humanitarian aid to Venezuelans without Maduro's assistance.

But Maduro's past attempts to consolidate power, combined with an unprecedented international response to recognize a leader who does not control the country's military, institutions or a portion of territory, does not have a direct correlation with other U.S.-backed efforts in Latin America and elsewhere. Experts who are both skeptical and supportive of the decision to recognize Guaidó's government and a warp-speed time frame to hold elections in a matter of weeks say violence beyond the sporadic street clashes over the past few weeks is likely, whether or not foreign troops enter the country.

"I don't see Maduro leaving peacefully," said Eric Farnsworth, a former State Department official who is now a vice president of the Council of the Americas and a supporter of the decision to recognize Guaidó. "He's not going to wake up with an epiphany, he's going to have to be forced out. If it happens, it's going to be by Venezuelans... members of the security forces or members of his own coalition, if they see him as ineffective."

Farnsworth is a critic of arguments made by Democratic Sen. Chris Murphy and former Obama foreign policy adviser Ben Rhodes in a Washington Post op-ed last week, who said recognizing Guaidó puts the U.S. in an inflexible position if Maduro doesn't relent.

"Chest-thumping declarations that melt away over time weaken American power and credibility," [Rhodes and Murphy wrote](#). "In Venezuela, if the armed forces continue to back Maduro, then last week's move may come to look feckless, while offering Maduro the opportunity to rally his domestic and foreign backers against U.S. intervention. Reckless talk of military options only compounds this problem."

Rhodes and Murphy's argument differed from [other Democrats](#) who argued that sanctions on Venezuelan oil would further cripple Venezuela's economy and hinder the ability for people to obtain food and medicine.

Shannon O’Neil, a senior fellow for Latin America studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, said the decision to recognize Guaidó is a “huge break from precedent” where governments continue to recognize de facto leaders who control institutions.

“If you look back historically the U.S. was not pleased with the Soviet Union for 50 plus years but they still recognized them,” O’Neil said. “I think Ben Rhodes and Chris Murphy were right, it’s a risky move. Not only are you condemning Maduro, you’re taking it one step further by saying we don’t recognize his right to rule because he wasn’t elected.”

O’Neil said the move by the U.S. and dozens of other countries is unprecedented.

“You give a rallying focus and hopefully momentum builds behind this person,” O’Neil said. “The risk is that if that doesn’t happen, then you’re stuck in this limbo with fewer alternatives than if you held your cards a little bit closer.”

Farnsworth said the situation in Venezuela is unique, though the U.S. involvement and eventual invasion to oust Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega in 1989 is the best comparison to the current situation. In that case, the U.S. recognized Guillermo Endara as president on the eve of invading the country, even though Endara did not control the military or a sizable portion of territory. Both countries have a prized asset that generated billions in revenue — the Panama Canal and Venezuela’s massive oil reserves.

In Panama’s case, recognizing Endara gave his government access to the canal’s coffers, similar to the U.S. oil sanctions on Venezuela’s state-run oil company announced last week. Since the invasion, Panama has held six elections which have generally been considered free and fair.

But in Panama’s case the U.S. was acting largely alone and had thousands of troops already stationed in the country. It invaded after Noriega’s forces killed U.S. citizens stationed in the country, which hasn’t happened in Venezuela. The invasion of Panama drew intense criticism from the Organization of American States at the time, though the organization is now supportive of the decision not to recognize Maduro. OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro has said the use of military force shouldn’t be ruled out in Venezuela.

“If people are not prepared to take steps designed to support the nascent Guaidó government, this could flop and that would be a huge setback,” Farnsworth said. “Does that mean the ultimate answer is U.S. troops? I don’t think that’s a healthy conversation to have. If Maduro wants to have U.S. troops at his doorstep, he’ll start targeting U.S. citizens.”

Farnsworth said the only scenario where Maduro is pressured to leave without violence involves Russia and China becoming convinced that Maduro’s potential successor would be better for them than the status quo and working with the international community on a transition plan. Russia and China continue to recognize

Maduro, and Russia has sent aircraft to Venezuela amid reports that Maduro is [looking to remove gold reserves](#) from the country.

“That’s the cleanest way but also the least likely,” Farnsworth said.

Dany Bahar, a Venezuelan economist and Brookings Institute fellow, said the ongoing humanitarian crisis is the variable that makes Maduro vulnerable compared to other autocratic rulers who maintained power for decades.

“If the humanitarian crisis keeps going it’s not going to stabilize, it’s only going to get worse,” Bahar said. “Even if Maduro manages to stay in power it’s going to be very challenging. Even if he has all the power and all the weapons, he’s going to be in a very unstable environment.”

The instability due to sanctions could hinder Maduro’s ability to dole out money to cronies and senior military officers, and increase the chances that military officers throw their power and guns behind Guaidó. Venezuelan air force Gen. Francisco Yanez [defected](#) from Maduro on Saturday, though most senior military officers are sticking with him for now.

“I think it’s pretty uncharted territory. If it pushes momentum and leads to the end of Maduro’s regime it will be deemed a huge success and it will be worth it,” O’Neil said. “If Maduro is still the head of the regime three months from now... you can make it worse. You have some repression, you’ve seen 40-plus people killed but there’s scenarios where it gets worse and you could see a civil war. The crackdown gets so bad that you see many people dead and another 3 to 5 million people flee.”