Opportunities to promote human rights and democratic values abroad: The case of Canadian foreign policy toward Venezuela

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Abstract
This article examines Canadian foreign policy toward Venezuela, as a litmus test of Ottawa’s promise to project a consistently strong voice for the protection of human rights and the advancement of democratic values in the world. The case is made that Canada is more likely to gear up to an assertive approach if there is a perception that there is an opportunity for democratization in the country, and for policymakers in Ottawa, if there is an opportunity to prioritize human rights and democracy, as opposed to more traditional national interest objectives. The article offers an explanation about when and how Canada typically promotes its liberal values abroad.

Keywords
Venezuela, foreign policy, human rights, democracy, Canada

This article examines Canadian foreign policy toward Venezuela, as a litmus test of Ottawa’s promise to project “a consistently strong voice for the protection of human rights and the advancement of democratic values” in the world.1

1. Government of Canada, “Canada’s approach to advancing human rights,” Ottawa, Ontario, 2017, https://international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/human_rights-droits_homme/advancing_rights-promouvoir_droits.aspx?lang=eng (accessed 31 July 2021).

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Beginning under Canada’s twenty-second prime minister Stephen Harper (6 February 2006 to 4 November 2015), but reaching new heights under Justin Trudeau’s Liberal government, Ottawa has been exceptionally steadfast in its defence of human rights and democracy (henceforth HRD) in Venezuela. This policy unfolded in response to the worsening of the humanitarian, economic, and political crisis in this country over the past few years.

While one can trace the roots of this crisis back to the presidency of Hugo Chávez (1999–2013), who was democratically elected for the first time in 1998, the deterioration was gradual under his rule but truly intensified under his successor in Miraflores, his former minister of foreign affairs and “yes-man” Nicolás Maduro (2013–).2 Chávez died in March of 2013, and Maduro managed to win a close presidential election in April. Since then, the country has descended into conditions normally associated with state failure and civil war.

Canada was a founding member of the Lima Group, an ad hoc coalition established on 8 August 2017 in Lima, Peru, to apply international pressure on Venezuela to democratize and respect human rights. This coalition of the willing was deemed necessary after years of vain efforts to work within the gridlocked Organization of American States (OAS) to apply the Inter-American Democratic Charter to the Venezuela case. The Lima Group includes most Latin American countries, and represents a majority of the region’s population, but it does not include the United States.

Maduro’s re-election on 20 May 2018 was neither free nor fair. On the first day of his second mandate (10 January 2019), the government of Canada made this statement: “Today, Nicolás Maduro’s regime loses any remaining appearance of legitimacy. Having seized power through fraudulent and anti-democratic elections [. . .], the Maduro regime is now fully entrenched as a dictatorship. The suffering of Venezuelans will only worsen should he continue to illegitimately cling to power.”3 In a rebuke to Maduro’s “usurpation,” on 23 January, the president of the democratically elected National Assembly, Juan Guaidó, was chosen by his peers to become the interim president of Venezuela. (He was not “self-appointed,” as if this were even possible, as some commentators said.) This nomination was immediately endorsed by Canada, the Lima Group, and dozens of other countries, mostly in the Americas and in Europe. In the early months of 2019, Venezuela seemed to be at a crossroads, and multilateral pressures could have conceivably restored democracy in the country and countered a menacing trend in the hemisphere.

The language used in Canada’s statements to blame Maduro and his regime could hardly be more categorical. When Maduro was not invited to the Summit of the Americas in February of 2018 by the host country (Peru), Trudeau’s second foreign minister (10 January 2017 to 20 November 2019), and the member of parliament for University-

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2. Javier Corrales and Michael Penfold, Dragon in the Tropics, Venezuela and the Legacy of Hugo Chávez (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2011), 163.
3. Global Affairs Canada (GAC), “Canada rejects the Maduro regime’s illegitimate mandate in Venezuela,” Ottawa, Ontario, 10 January 2019.
Rosedale, Chrystia Freeland, approvingly added that it “would have been farcical” to have him present. Maduro’s regime is “despicable,” she also said. And the Canadian government offered more than “harsh words and condemnations.” The first rounds of sanctions against Venezuelan officials were imposed in the fall of 2017, some of them using a new legal weapon—the Justice for Victims of Corrupt Foreign Officials Act, adopted in October and better known as Magnitsky Act—and targeting Maduro himself, his vice president Tareck El Aissami, a number of cabinet ministers, and the two surviving brothers of former president Hugo Chávez. Canada has now imposed targeted sanctions against 112 Maduro regime officials—not quite as many as the US, but significantly more than the EU. Canada has sanctions and related measures in place against only nineteen other countries in the world, Venezuela being the only one in the Americas.

Other actions have included maintaining the existing ban on Canada’s support for Venezuelan candidacies to multilateral and international organizations; imposing a ban on formal bilateral military cooperation; instructing Government of Canada officials not to attend international or multilateral meetings and events hosted by, or in, Venezuela; and restricting the issuance of invitations to senior Venezuelan government and military officials to attend events hosted by, or in, Canada, except where directly relevant to Canadian policy priorities. Diplomatic relations with Venezuela were downgraded after the 2018 “illegitimate and anti-democratic” presidential elections, as a result of which the Embassy of Canada to Venezuela was to be headed by a chargé d’affaires rather than an ambassador (although the Canadian chargé d’affaires had been expelled in December of 2017). In 2019, Canada stopped recognizing the diplomats appointed by Maduro to Canada, and all operations by the Canadian embassy in Caracas were temporarily suspended at the end of June. In collaboration with five other countries in the Americas, Canada referred the Maduro regime’s illegitimate hold on power to the International Criminal Court (ICC). On 4 February 2019, the Government of Canada announced close to $55 million in humanitarian aid and development

4. “Canada backs Peru’s decision to withdraw Maduro’s invitation to regional summit,” Andina, Agencia Peruana de Noticias, Lima, 14 February 2018, https://andina.pe/agencia/noticia-canada-backs-perus-decision-to-withdraw-maduros-invitation-to-regional-summit-699303.aspx (accessed 31 July 2021).
5. “As of January 22, 2021, the Treasury Department had imposed sanctions on roughly 166 Venezuelan or Venezuelan-connected individuals and the State Department had revoked the visas of more than 1,000 individuals and their families.” US Congressional Research Service, “Venezuela: Overview of U.S. Sanctions,” updated 22 January 2021.
6. GAC, “Canada condemns fraudulent presidential elections in Venezuela,” Ottawa, Ontario, 21 May 2018.
7. GAC issued a statement by Minister Freeland in which she says that “the regime has taken steps to limit the ability of foreign embassies to function in Venezuela, particularly those advocating for the restoration of democracy in Venezuela” (my emphasis). GAC, Statement by the Honourable Chrystia Freeland, Minister of Foreign Affairs, “Canada suspends operations at Embassy of Canada to Venezuela,” Ottawa, Ontario, 2 June 2019.
support, and another $27 million was announced in May 2020.\textsuperscript{8} This placed Canada among the top donors in the world responding to the humanitarian crisis. The Venezuela Desk at Global Affairs Canada (GAC) was enhanced into a “Venezuela Task Force” in September 2017. Since September 2020, the task force grew in size with the addition of the development co-operation programme, as Canada hosted the international donors conference in June 2021 to seek funding for the Venezuelan migration issue.\textsuperscript{9}

**Explaining Canada’s bold response**

In the words of Thomas Axworthy, democracy promotion in Canada usually involves “low-level brick-by-brick building of institutions, listening, mutual learning and a great many workshops and professional development exercise.”\textsuperscript{10} Rarely does it involve the imposition of economic sanctions or reference to the ICC, let alone the recognition of an opposition leader as the only legitimate president in the country, as is the case for Venezuela. Is this evidence of inconsistency, or is there a logical explanation for the selective application of Canada’s idealist foreign policy? The South American nation is hardly the only country in the world with a poor HRD record. It is not even the most dictatorial country in the Americas (Cuba is).\textsuperscript{11}

What is suggested in this article is that there is in fact some consistency in Canadian policy, if one identifies the appropriate explanatory variables. Using this case study as a plausibility probe for a hypothesis on when and how Canada actively promotes HRD, the case is made that it is more likely to depart from a “brick-by-brick,” capacity building HRD approach, and gear up to a more assertive (even adversarial) one, in the presence of a structure of opportunity at both ends of the bilateral relations. Looking at the case of Venezuela, this article argues the following:

8. Levon Sevunts, “Canada pledges $27M to help Venezuelan refugees weather pandemic,” CBC, 26 May 2020, https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-venezuela-pandemic-covid-coronavirus-1.5585726 (accessed 31 July 2021).

9. International donors pledged a total of $1.5 billion USD in funding, including $954 million USD in grants and $600 million USD in loans. See GAC, “Canada mobilizes international donors to support Venezuelan refugees, migrants and countries in the region,” Ottawa, Ontario, 17 June 2021.

10. Thomas S. Axworthy, *Now More Than Ever: The Case for Canada Advancing Democracy and Human Rights Abroad*, Presentation to the House of Commons: Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, 7 February 2019, https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/FAAE/Brief/BR10323147/br-external/AxworthyThomas-e.pdf (accessed 31 July 2021), 9. For an overview of democracy promotion in Canadian foreign policy, see Jeremy Martin Ladd, “Contemporary developments in Canadian democracy promotion and the way forward,” *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 20, no. 2 (2014): 209–223.

11. While most countries in the region are nominally democratic, and consequently would not be good fits for Canadian democracy promotion, human rights records in many of them leave much to be desired, including close trading partners and allies of Canada like Colombia and Mexico. However, the model presented here applies to opportunities to push for HRD, not just human rights.
1. There needs to be an opportunity for democratization in the country, prompted by 1.1 a major, multidimensional and sudden crisis, as well as 1.2 the presence of a credible democratic opposition ready to champion democratization. Indicators of crisis include (but are not limited to) economic collapse, humanitarian crisis, massive exodus of the population, increased repression, and authoritarian consolidation. What makes an opposition credible as a democratic force is a combination of organizational coherence, domestic support, international recognition, and a public commitment to democratic values, preferably rooted in an existing democratic tradition.

2. For policymakers in Ottawa, there needs to be an opportunity to prioritize HRD, meaning that this path 2.1 does not appreciably threaten Canadian economic or security interests (trade, investment, and alliances), 2.2 presents an opportunity for broad-based multilateral action (always a plus for a middle power like Canada), and 2.3 does not meet significant opposition in parliament or in public opinion. Arguably, 2.2 is especially relevant for a middle power such as Canada (it is a preferred but not indispensable option for the US). Both 2.1 and 2.3 give policymakers some latitude to formulate initiatives not urgently dictated by hard interests.

One should remember that opportunities are not enough: one needs to seize them. It is more likely, though by no means certain, when key conditions are met.

This article looks at this unique case, but it is meant to be a useful starting point for making sense of the seemingly inconsistent and selective responses by Ottawa to HRD deficits in the world, as well as “within case” variations over time in either set of opportunities.

**Opportunities for democratization**

While announcing that Canada would host an urgent meeting of the Lima Group in Ottawa on 4 February 2019, Minister Freeland pressed that the “[Venezuela] crisis poses huge security, humanitarian, and economic challenges for the entire hemisphere.”\(^{12}\) The full impact of the crisis came under Maduro, and right around the time when the Trudeau administration came to power in 2015. In a 23 February 2019 statement on Venezuela, Freeland said, “For the past two years, the world has watched with great concern as Venezuela, under Nicolás Maduro’s rule, has descended into dictatorship.”\(^ {13}\) Arguably, bigger blows to democracy in Venezuela took place in 2015, as the first Lima Group declaration (8 August 2017) recognized, but 2017 was the year when Canada truly increased its pressure.

\(^{12}\) GAC, “Canada to convene Lima Group and other countries about Venezuela crisis,” Ottawa, Ontario, 28 January 2019.

\(^{13}\) My emphasis. GAC, “Canada calls for safe and unhindered humanitarian access to Venezuela,” Ottawa, Ontario, 23 February 2019.
Crisis

The crisis in Venezuela has two sources (political and economic), and one tragic consequence: a deep and ongoing humanitarian crisis—foreign minister François-Philippe Champagne once called it a “human tragedy”—with destabilizing effects in the region.

The political crisis unfolded from “one of the most acute cases of democratic backsliding in the twenty-first century,” 14 starting with Chávez’s failed coup in 1992, followed by the decay of the democratic regime until the free and fair election of Chávez as president in 1998. Chávez himself was the target of a failed coup in 2002. His regime can be characterized as populist and “hybrid,” mixing elements of popular sovereignty (and popular support) with growing illiberal tendencies, especially in the years following the failed coup of 2002. 15 The transition to a full-fledged authoritarian and repressive regime was only completed under his successor.

Under Maduro, the country experienced the longest and largest popular protests in Latin American history. According to one reputable source, up to 17,739 protests took place in 2019 alone. 16 Those years were marked by the militarization of the state and, according to multiple credible sources, by extraordinary levels of repression, even by Latin American standards. 17 In September of 2020, a 411-page report of the United Nations Fact-Finding Mission, set up by the Human Rights Council, found “reasonable grounds to believe that Venezuelan authorities and security forces have since 2014

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14. Javier Corrales, “Democratic backsliding through electoral irregularities: The case of Venezuela,” European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies 109 (January–June 2020): 42. In this article, which looks specifically at electoral irregularities since the election of Chávez, Corrales demonstrates that “as of 2018, the total number of irregularities reached 117, and the 2018 presidential election in particular was conducted with the greatest cumulus of irregularities ever” (49). Overall, for Corrales, “Maduro inherited all of Chávez’s legacy irregularities and made them worse” (57).

15. Venezuela under Chávez opposed the 2001 Inter-American Democratic Charter more than any other OAS member, “particularly the document’s language of ‘representative democracy’ as a hemispheric standard.” But it agreed to support the document, “having lobbied successfully for the insertion of references to citizen participation.” Barry S. Levitt, “A desultory defense of democracy: OAS Resolution 1080 and the Inter-American Democratic Charter,” Latin American Politics and Society 48, no. 3 (2006): 93–123.

16. “Dos décadas de protestas en Venezuela,” Especial, La Gran Aldea (online), https://lagranaldea.com/report/protestas/ (accessed 31 July 2021).

17. See Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, “Democratic institutions, the rule of law and human rights in Venezuela: Country report,” 31 December 2017; Inter-American Juridical Committee, “Declaration on the situation in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela,” 22 February 2019; “Report of the General Secretariat of the Organization of American States and the Panel of Independent International Experts on the possible commission of crimes against humanity in Venezuela,” Washington DC, 29 May 2019; “Human rights in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela: Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the situation of human rights in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela,” A/HRC/41/18, 5 July 2019; International Crisis Group, “A glimmer of light in Venezuela’s gloom,” Latin America report no. 75, 15 July 2019.
planned and executed serious human rights violations, some of which—including arbitrary killings and the systematic use of torture—amount to crimes against humanity.\textsuperscript{18}

Venezuela is the only country in Latin America that has seen its human rights record get much worse since 1999. According to Freedom House, it is the tenth largest score decline in the world (−17) over a period of ten years, and the biggest decline in the world in free access to internet.\textsuperscript{19} The NGO Freedom House considered the country as “partly free” (scores 3.0 to 5.0) until 2016, though it had been closer to “not free” than “free” since 2010. The Venezuelan government withdrew from the American Convention on Human Rights in September of 2013, leaving citizens and residents unable to request intervention by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights when local remedies for abuses were ineffective or unavailable. The country has lived in a state of emergency since 2016.

The magnitude of Venezuela’s economic collapse is exceptional in a time of peace. Once South America’s wealthiest country, it is now its poorest. According to a June 2020 article in The Economist, “[b]y the end of this year, in real terms the economy is expected to be a fifth the size it was in 2013, when Mr. Maduro became president.”\textsuperscript{20} Venezuela’s GDP is now smaller than Costa Rica’s and the Dominican Republic’s. After peaking in 2018 at 1.8 million percent, the inflation rate is now in the thousands, in a continent where hyperinflation disappeared in the 1980s. This is leading to the gradual abandonment of the bolivar, dollarization, greater informality, and growing illicit and informal economy.

The drivers for \textit{eight consecutive years of contraction} were many years of mismanagement of the economy under Chávez, mitigated by $980 billion in oil revenue during his presidency. Under Maduro, the economy’s collapse was compounded by a major drop in the price of oil. US sanctions continued to make things worse, especially the additional ones adopted under the Trump administration.\textsuperscript{21}

The 2016 Global Peace Index ranks Venezuela as the world’s fourth most violent country, after Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The report estimates the economic impact of violence at over 40 percent of GDP; the economic impact of homicide alone—36 percent of GDP—is the highest in the world.\textsuperscript{22} Increased violence and recession are also related because of the expansion of shady and outright criminal activities in the

\textsuperscript{18} UN Human Rights Council, Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/FFMV/Pages/Index.aspx (accessed 31 July 2021).

\textsuperscript{19} Freedom House, “Freedom on the net report,” 2020, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2020/pandemics-digital-shadow (accessed 31 July 2021).

\textsuperscript{20} The Economist, “How Venezuela’s regime plans to win this year’s legislative election,” 27 June 2020, https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2020/06/27/how-venezuelas-regime-plans-to-win-this-years-legislative-election (accessed 1 July 2020).

\textsuperscript{21} Benedicte Bull and Antulio Rosales, “Into the shadows: Sanctions, rentierism, and economic informalization in Venezuela,” European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies 109 (January–June 2020): 107–133.

\textsuperscript{22} https://web.archive.org/web/20190115185838/https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-reports/detail/itc/VEN/ (accessed 31 July 2021).
country, such as drug trafficking, contraband, extortion, overpricing imports, and illegal mining ("blood gold") with devastating social and environmental ("ecocide") consequences. While this kleptocratic ecosystem is gaining importance relative to the regular economy, it is especially beneficial to the top leaders, which could represent challenges for authoritarian control in the future.

Approximately 5.6 million Venezuelans have left the country since 2014, roughly 18 percent of the population. This is the largest exodus in the region’s recent history, in a country which hosted thousands of immigrants and refugees during the twentieth century.

According to the US think tank Fund for Peace, which produces the Fragile States Index (formerly the Failed States Index), in 2019 Venezuela was ranked as the twenty-eighth most fragile state in the world. It is in the category “Alert,” two steps down from “Very High Alert” and “High Alert,” second only to Haiti (thirteenth) in the hemisphere, and quite far ahead of a host of Latin American countries under the category “Elevated Warning,” such as Guatemala (fifty-seventh). Venezuela is number one in the category “Most-Worsened Countries in 2019.”

As Thomas Legler wrote, “Thanks to its cross-border attributes like migration, public health, and transnational organized crime, we have [also] witnessed the regionalization of the Venezuelan crisis.” That such a regionalization could happen in a time of peace, in a middle-income region with old nations and old states, is quite extraordinary.

**Democratic opposition**

Unlike many countries analyzed in books with titles like “Exporting Democracy,” Venezuela has both a democratic opposition and a democratic tradition.

While President Maduro terminated democracy, he has not eliminated a fractious and ebbing but still substantial democratic opposition with considerable support abroad. Maduro seems more interested in having a powerless opposition—like the so-called “scorpions,” opposition lawmakers bribed to turn their backs on Guaidó—than in having none at all. For all his (and Chávez’s) well-documented devotion to Cuba, he

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23. Francisco Dallmeier and Cristina V. Burelli contend that Venezuela is at the top of the list of Amazonian countries with the highest number of illegal mines: “Hundreds of mining sectors have been detected, including 59 illegal gold mining clusters in Canaima National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage site, and other protected areas, which are home to 27 Indigenous communities,” in *The Washington Post*, “The world must act to stop Venezuela’s environmental destruction,” 22 February 2021.

24. BTI, “Venezuela Country Report, 2020,” https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report-VEN.html#pos3 (accessed 31 July 2021); *Political Risk Report, Caracas Chronicles* 195, 14 February 2020.

25. *The Economist*, 13 February 2021, 34; UNHCR, “Venezuela situation,” https://www.unhcr.org/venezuela-emergency.html?query=venezuela (accessed 31 July 2021).

26. Fund for Peace, “Fragile states index,” https://fundforpeace.org/2019/04/10/fragile-states-index-2019/ (accessed 31 July 2021).

27. Thomas Legler, “A story within a story: Venezuela’s crisis, regional actors, and Western hemispheric order upheaval,” *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 109 (January–June 2020): 142–143.
is leaning toward the Putin model, an option more in line with the twenty-first-century trend of “competitive” and hybrid authoritarian regimes.

Up to fifty-seven countries recognized Guaidó as the legitimate interim president of Venezuela, though “the reality of how this recognition is put into practice varies widely,” as Kristen Martínez-Gugerli stated in a recent update of the situation. Up to thirty out of the fifty-seven countries, including Canada and most European countries, have recognized Guaidó but in practice have open diplomatic relations with both the Guaidó and Maduro governments.

The nomination of Juan Guaidó as interim president in January of 2019 emboldened Canada and countries from around the world to step up their pressure on Maduro. While there can be reasonable doubts about the constitutionality of his nomination by the National Assembly (based on articles 233, 333, and 350 of Chávez’s Bolivarian Constitution), the fact is that the legislature became the only remaining democratically elected institution in the country after the “usurpation” of 9 January 2019. The conditions were in place for the international community to offer support to a domestic effort, as opposed to a foreign intervention. “For the first time in many years,” as Minister Freeland put it in her address to open the tenth Lima Group meeting on 4 February 2019, “Venezuela’s National Assembly and now interim president Guaidó have charted a constitutional path forward to establish an interim government.”

Venezuela was one of the first Latin American countries to democratize in the twentieth century, and the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, adopted by referendum in 1999, is mostly democratic. Again, to quote Minister Freeland, Canada acted in solidarity with “the people of Venezuela and their desire to restore democracy and human rights in Venezuela.”

A quick comparison with Cuba is helpful, since it is often considered the model for Venezuelan regime. Fidel Castro’s real or potential opposition was thoroughly extirpated from the body politic roughly two years after the overthrow of dictator Fulgencio Batista. For six decades, Cuba had dissidents rather than an opposition (though this may change in the wake of the unprecedented and nationwide protests of 11–12 July 2021).

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28. Kristen Martínez-Gugerli, “Interactive map: Degrees of diplomatic recognition of Guaidó and Maduro,” Venezuelan Politics and Human Rights, Venezuela Program of the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), 15 October 2020, https://www.venezuelablog.org/interactive-map-degrees-of-diplomatic-recognition-of-guaido-and-maduro/ (accessed 31 July 2021).

29. This means that “Maduro diplomats still control the embassy and are the main Venezuelan diplomatic representation in that country, while the Guaidó representatives operate through more informal channels.” Ibid. See also Chris Arsenault, “The ambassador with no embassy: Venezuela’s opposition loses momentum in bid to oust Maduro,” CBC News, 3 September 2020, https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/venezuela-canada-ambassador-maduro-oil-1.5704520 (accessed 31 July 2021).

30. GAC, “Address by Foreign Minister to open 10th Lima Group Meeting,” Ottawa, Ontario, 4 February 2019.

31. My emphasis. GAC, “Canada and the Venezuela Crisis,” Ottawa, Ontario, 29 March 2019, https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/response_conflict-reponse_conflits/crisis-cries/venezuela.aspx?lang=eng (accessed 31 July 2021).
The European Parliament awards the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought annually, and it did to Cuban dissidents Oswaldo Paya in 2002, the Ladies in White in 2005, and Guillermo Fariñas in 2010. In contrast, in 2017, the Sakharov Prize was awarded to Venezuela’s “Democratic Opposition.”

To acknowledge the presence of a democratic opposition is not equivalent to claiming that all members of the opposition are democrats, or that their avowed beliefs today guarantee democratic behavior tomorrow. In other words, this is not a pan-glossian judgement on the opposition to Maduro.

**Opportunities to prioritize human rights and democratic values**

“Canada has rarely, if ever, proven willing to sacrifice material advantage for international human rights,” concludes scholar Andrew Lui, in a fairly non-controversial statement. And yet, listening to government officials and reading GAC statements, one is asked to believe that a free, environmentally sound, democratic Latin America, where everybody’s rights are respected (especially those of Indigenous peoples, women, LGBTQ, and human rights defenders), would be a Latin America that is safer for Canadian investment and trade. No contradiction. In an address at the business-friendly Canadian Council for the Americas Annual Awards Gala in May of 2019, Minister Freeland, who tends to be voluble on that question, said that “it is not only because of our values, but also because of our national interest, that Canada today is fighting really, really hard for liberal democracy and the rules-based international order.” She also said, “Canada—with 36 million people—could never thrive in a Hobbesian great power world where might makes right.” In a statement celebrating the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights’ seventieth anniversary, she made a promise: “We will always speak out against violations and strive for a world where the rights and freedoms of all people are respected—**even when that causes us adversity**.”

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32. Andrew Lui, *Why Canada Cares: Human Rights and Foreign Policy in Theory and Practice* (McGill-Queens University Press, 2012), 6. On democracy assistance, see the special issue of *International Journal* 65, no. 3 (2010).

33. GAC, “Address by Minister of Foreign Affairs at the Canadian Council for the Americas Annual Awards Gala 2019,” Toronto, Ontario, 30 May 2019, https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2019/06/address-by-minister-of-foreign-affairs-at-the-canadian-council-for-the-americas-annual-awards-gala-2019.html (accessed 31 July 2021).

34. Ibid. Andrew Thompson also wrote that “a world in which international human rights law is marginalized is one that will not be friendly to Canada.” Andrew Thompson, “Canada, human rights, and the future of the liberal international order,” *International Journal* 73, no. 2 (2018): 307.

35. My emphasis. GAC, “Statement by Minister of Foreign Affairs on Human Rights Day,” Ottawa, Ontario, 10 December 2018.
Economic and security interests

Canada may “always speak out against violations,” but whether it decides to dial up or down its “strong voice” has much to do with the extent to which that could “cause us adversity,” to use Minister Freeland’s expression. Thus, economic factors can conceivably explain Canada’s hesitancy to push hard for HRD in countries like Saudi Arabia (the biggest importer of Canadian weapons), or China (Canada’s second largest trade partner, though far behind the US).

These factors are secondary at best in the case of Venezuela. The oil-producing country was Canada’s second trading partner in the region during the 1960s, behind the much larger Mexico and slightly ahead of Cuba. Nowadays, official statistics indicate that at the onset of the recent crisis, Venezuela was Canada’s eighty-second largest merchandise trade partner (2017), and the fifty-third largest services trade partner in the world (2016). In terms of volume, the modest trade with Venezuela was not notably affected by the Bolivarian “revolution” under Chávez, but it was under Maduro. Canadian exports dropped significantly in 2016, from $630 million in 2015 (roughly the average over the previous twenty years) to $250 million in 2016, and down to $73 million in 2020. Imports from Venezuela dropped earlier but more precipitously around the same time. Finally, over the past quarter of a century, Canadian investments fluctuated, with a figure of $391 million in 1997 and $456 million in 2015 (with a peak of $959 million in 2010), before dropping to negative figures in 2016 and 2017.

Though Canada has more free trade agreements in Latin America than in any other region, its economic interests reside more in investment, primarily in the resources and financial sectors, than in trade, per se. In Venezuela, this translates to two files: oil and mines. The former Crown corporation Petro-Canada, a retail and wholesale marketing brand subsidiary of Suncor Energy since 1991, left Venezuela after selling its stake to state oil company Petróleos de Venezuela SA in June of 2007. It appears that Canadian oil producers have capitalized on Venezuela’s economic crisis by increasing their share of the world’s largest refining market. According to an article published in the Financial Post, “Venezuelan heavy oil production competes directly with Canadian oil sands barrels for space at refineries specially calibrated to process heavy blends.” For the first time, in 2018, Canadian exports to the US Gulf Coast outstripped Venezuelan exports.

36. See John Dirks, “Friendly noises but distant neighbours: Pearson, Latin America and the Caribbean,” in Asa McKercher and Galen Roger Perras, eds., Mike’s World, Lester B. Pearson and Canadian External Affairs (Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press, 2018), 201–202.
37. Canada, Library of Parliament, “Canadian trade and investment activity: Canada-Venezuela,” publication no. 2018-638-E. See https://lop.parl.ca/sites/PublicWebsite/default/en_CA/ResearchPublications/TradeAndInvestment/2018638E? (accessed 31 July 2021).
38. Ibid; Canada, “Trade data online.” See https://www.ic.gc.ca/app/scr/tdst/tdo/crrt.html?grouped=GROUPIED&searchType=All&areaCodes=785&naArea=9999&countryList=specific&toFromCountry=CDN&reportType=TE&timePeriod=10%7CComplete+Years&currency=CDN&productType=HS6&runReport=true (accessed 31 July 2021).
39. Ibid.
“That’s a fairly considerable shift in the balance,” according to Scotiabank commodity economist Rory Johnston. Rusoro Mining Ltd., a gold producer and explorer with headquarters in Vancouver, still operates in the prolific Bolivar State mining region in southern Venezuela, though part of its assets were expropriated in 2011. The Venezuelan government’s sponsored media agency Telesur once ran a story that Canada “could have plans to win control of Venezuela’s large gold reserves, as gold mining in Latin America is currently dominated by Canadian firms such as Glencore.” In sum, there is certainly a trail of Canadian capitalist interest in the South American nation, but there is no evidence of a capitalist plot driving foreign policy toward this country.

Another possible area where righteous foreign policy could clash with cruel reality is immigration. The Liberal government only eased immigration and refugee rules for Venezuelans in August of 2019, and in a limited way: the relaxed rules only apply to failed asylum claimants who are given a chance to challenge deportation orders “by arguing that they will face risk if they are sent home,” and whose claims “were rejected prior to Aug. 19, as the government says changes to conditions in that country will be taken into account on all future refugee claims.” To date, there has been no indication that Ottawa is prepared to extend something like temporary protection status (offered by US President Biden), or residency rights (as Colombia just extended), to Venezuelan migrants. It is not a simple question, however, and the handling of both HRD and immigration challenges offers ample illustration to H.L. Mencken’s bon mot: “There is always a well-known solution to every human problem—neat, plausible, and wrong.”

With the relative dearth of hard interest at stake, the personal preferences of a prime minister, or dominant personality of a minister of foreign affairs, may acquire more prominence in shaping foreign policy. Think of Trudeau père and fils and their affection for the Castro family, or Harper’s loyalty to Israel or perhaps to Colombian president Alvaro Uribe. In the same vein, interviews with various officials at GAC confirmed the impression that Minister Freeland wore HRD on her sleeve and truly led the charge on Venezuela, with the same moral clarity, if not the personal dimension, that was manifest in her attention to Ukraine and Russia. During her tenure as foreign affairs minister, she

40. Geoffrey Morgan, “Canadian oil flows into US Gulf Coast market as Venezuela continues ‘death spiral,’” Financial Post, 23 May 2018. See also “Why Venezuela is Alberta’s biggest competitor,” Oils Sands Magazine, 15 February 2016, https://www.oilsandsmagazine.com/news/2016/2/15/why-venezuela-is-albertas-biggest-competitor (accessed 31 July 2021).
41. See http://www.rusoro.com/s/News_Releases.asp?ReportID=837949 (accessed 31 July 2021).
42. Perhaps it is referring to Glencore Canada, but Glencore is an Anglo-Swiss multinational based in Switzerland. See “Cuba stands up for Venezuela during talks with Canada,” Telesur, 4 May 2019, https://www.telesurenglish.net/news/Cuba-Stands-Up-For-Venezuela-During-Talks-With-Canada-20190504-0019.html (accessed 8 August 2021).
43. The Canadian Press, “Canada eases rules for Venezuelan refugees, immigrants,” Global News, 20 August 2019.
44. H.L. Mencken, “The Divine Afflatus,” in Mencken, Prejudices: Second Series (London: Jonathan Cape, 1921), 158.
arguably paid more attention to Venezuela than to the entire African continent. Canada’s last ambassador to Venezuela from 2014 to 2017, and current president of the Canadian International Council, Ben Rowswell, told journalists that Ms. Freeland understood the gravity of the Venezuela crisis “earlier than most of her counterparts on the world stage.” She “saw Venezuela—like Ukraine—as a ‘front line in the emerging global competition between democracy and authoritarianism,’ with Russia, China, Iran and Cuba backing the Maduro regime.” Within the Liberal family, she was praised by human rights activist Irwin Cotler, but indirectly reprimanded by John Manley, who served as president of the Business Council of Canada from 2010 to 2018. Manley said that historically Canada has been able to balance its economic interests with its values. “[L]ately,” he said, “we seem to be mainly focused on the emphasis on values and not so much on where our commercial interests may lie.”

The previous foreign minister from October 2015 to January 2017, Stéphane Dion, was also “concerned” about the rapidly deteriorating situation in Venezuela. The situation worsened after his departure, which might explain the harsher tone adopted by Freeland. But in late 2016, under Dion, Canada was still calling “on all sides to react with restraint and to look for a lawful resolution to the serious crisis facing the country.” Be that as it may, the minister of foreign affairs is chosen by, and works for, the prime minister. She was in effect an engineer, not an architect, of foreign policy.

**Broad-based multilateral action**

The Venezuela crisis gave Canada an opportunity to be a “leader” while “working with partners to champion human rights around the world.” Its foreign policy toward Venezuela certainly seems less extraordinary when one considers that dozens of allies, including the likes of Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Korea, also recognized Guaidó as interim president. Freeland said that “the struggle in Venezuela is not a fight between left and right,” and that it is “about those who stand for democracy and human rights rising up against dictatorship and repression.” Thomas Axworthy also said that

45. Jocelyn Coulon, *Un selfie avec Justin Trudeau, Regard critique sur la diplomatie du premier ministre* (Montréal: Québec Amérique, 2018), 159. Coulon, who was a speechwriter and senior political advisor for Foreign Minister Stéphane Dion (from November 2015 to January 2017), also writes that Freeland “ethnicize[d]” Canadian policy toward Ukraine (187).

46. Mark MacKinnon, Adrian Morrow, Nathan Vanderklippe, Geoffrey York, and Michelle Zilio, “For Chrystia Freeland, the political is personal,” *The Globe and Mail*, 3 October 2019.

47. Neil Moss, “Mending global relationships, defending economic interests Champagne’s top tasks, say foreign policy analysts,” *The Hill Times*, 22 November 2019.

48. GAC, Statement by the Honourable Stéphane Dion, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ottawa, Ontario, 21 October 2016.

49. See GAC, “Canada is a leader in the effort to restore democracy and human rights in Venezuela,” Address by Minister of Foreign Affairs at the Canadian Council for the Americas Annual Awards Gala 2019, Toronto, Ontario, 30 May 2019.

50. Ibid.
“it is Russia, China, Cuba, Iran, and Turkey that are the backers of Maduro. The
democratic-authoritarian divide has never been clearer.”

This line of thought irons out some incongruities. The Lima Group is still mostly a
coalition of centrist or right-leaning governments, but it is as democratic as such a large
coalition can realistically be. Founding members like Argentina and Mexico shunned
the Group after the election of leftist presidents in 2019 and 2018, respectively. The
Group gained the support of Bolivia after the right-wing coup of 2019, but lost it after
the electoral victory of the left in 2020. Founding members like Guatemala and
Honduras have dubious democratic credentials, due to how dysfunctional their
democratic institutions are. Critiques of the Group, mostly on the left, never fail to
mention those two to discredit the entire coalition. Switching off democratic sensi-
tibilities, they often call on Ottawa to use its Cuba connections to put Havana in the
driver’s seat of negotiations between Maduro and the opposition. Cuba is a special and
interesting case, for it is Venezuela’s strongest ally, as well as Canada’s friend and
“ally,” as Trudeau said. On several occasions Freeland and Trudeau publicly called for
Cuba to be part of the solution in Venezuela, even suggesting that it could “potentially
play a very positive role” in the Lima Group. Trudeau said this publicly in front of
Guaidó during his visit to Ottawa in January of 2020. Guaidó politely listened and
smiled, which caused some confusion among his coalition back home. Immediately
after leaving Ottawa, on 29 January, his “government” issued a communiqué that made
it crystal clear that Cuba was part of the problem, not the solution. Whether Cuba
could serve as mediator, as it did during the peace negotiations between a guerrilla
group and the Colombian government, is worth a discussion, provided one bears in
mind that the sustainability of a pro-Cuba regime in oil-rich Venezuela, one that for
years replaced the Soviet Union as the only major underwriter to the Castro regime, is
immeasurably more vital to Havana’s interests than a clutch of unserviceable guer-
rilleros at the end of their road in Colombia.

The Lima Group was necessary to remedy the gridlock within the OAS, a sort of
League of Nations that struggles to agree on any course of action beyond a basic agenda

51. Axworthy, Now More Than Ever, 4. Jaime Porras Ferreyra, “Guaidó avala los contactos de Canadá con
Cuba para buscar una salida a la crisis de Venezuela,” El País, 28 January 2020, https://elpais.com/
internacional/2020/01/28/america/1580178306_420698.html (accessed 31 July 2021).
52. Michelle Zilio, “Freeland says Cuba could play role in stabilizing Venezuela, despite US concerns, The
Globe and Mail, 7 June 2019. See also Sarah Marsh, “Cuba asks Canada to help end US sanctions on
Venezuela,” The Globe and Mail, 29 August 2019; and Jaime Porras Ferreyra, “Guaidó avala los
contactos de Canadá con Cuba para buscar una salida a la crisis de Venezuela,” El País, 28 January 2020.
53. The opening statement in this communiqué summarizes it well: “The Cuban dictatorship is directly
responsible for the crisis and the systematic violation of human rights in Venezuela.” Also: “The only
possible role that Cubans can assume in Venezuela is to have their officials leave our country so that
Venezuelans can undertake their transition to democracy” (my translation). The statement ends with
“Viva Venezuela libre, Viva Cuba libre, Viva Latinoamérica libre.”
of support to member states. Some of its members benefit from Chávez’s largesse through programs such as Petrocaribe and Petrosur.\textsuperscript{54} Still, the Lima Group enjoys the enthusiastic support of the OAS’s secretary general, Luis Almagro (a former foreign minister in a left-of-centre government in Uruguay), and Canada has been instrumental in the passing of several statements and resolutions at the OAS (though there has been no concrete action) “supporting the people of Venezuela in their efforts to achieve political and economic reforms.”

The Lima Group enjoyed the support of the Trump administration, but it is fallacious to claim, as Venezuela’s foreign minister Jorge Arreaza once did, that the Lima Group “[took] its orders from US President Donald Trump.”\textsuperscript{55} Unlike Trump, the Lima Group has consistently rejected military intervention as an option, preferring what could be called “intervention without intervening.”\textsuperscript{56} The Venezuelan opposition, including the sectors represented by Guaidó, is not as clear on this issue, with its calls to look closely at pathways offered by the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (TIAR) and the Responsibility to Protect narrative.\textsuperscript{57} In any case, Trump never quite decided whether he wanted to meet with Maduro, whom he unsurprisingly liked more than Guaidó, or overthrow him militarily.\textsuperscript{58} Other differences emerged over the last year between the Lima Group and the Trump administration, but with the ICC the pattern has been one of increasing convergence.\textsuperscript{59}

While the US is not part of the Lima Group, Canada and the United States formed an association on 5 September 2017 to coordinate sanctions against the Maduro regime. Canada appears to be independently reaching conclusions politically similar to the US’s, with some differences in tactic: not an uncomfortable place to be for a Canadian government.

In sum, the Venezuela crisis presented an opportunity for Canada and most countries of the region to act multilaterally and as equals, independently (in fact ahead) of the US,

\textsuperscript{54} To that effect, Canada hosted a meeting on 23 March 2019 in Barbados between members of CARICOM and Juan Guaidó, to try to lure reluctant Caribbean nations away from Maduro. See “Canada facilitates meeting between CARICOM countries and Venezuela representatives,” Ottawa, Ontario, 26 March 2019.

\textsuperscript{55} Quoted in Franklin Briceno and Scott Smith, “Foreign diplomats urge Venezuela’s Maduro to hand over power;” Associated Press, 4 January 2019, https://apnews.com/article/e35abd98f93b4dc4980002afa8af70b9 (accessed 31 July 2021).

\textsuperscript{56} Andrew F. Cooper and Thomas Legler, “A tale of two mesas: The OAS defense of democracy in Peru and Venezuela,” \textit{Global Governance} 11, no. 4 (2005): 440.

\textsuperscript{57} Political Risk Report no. 224, \textit{Caracas Chronicles}, 4 September 2020.

\textsuperscript{58} Jonathan Swan, “Exclusive: Trump cold on Guaidó, would consider meeting Maduro,” \textit{Axios}, 21 June 2020, https://www.axios.com/trump-venezuela-guaido-maduro-ea665367-b088-4900-8d73-c8fb50d96845.html (accessed 31 July 2021).

\textsuperscript{59} The Lima Group was not insisting that Maduro step down immediately, or that Guaidó should too, as was proposed by the US in its “Democratic Transition Framework for Venezuela” presented on 31 March 2020. US Department of State, “Democratic transition framework for Venezuela, Office of the Spokesperson,” 31 March 2020, https://www.state.gov/democratic-transition-framework-for-venezuela/ (accessed 31 July 2021). The Lima Group’s response to this proposal can be found here: https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/international_relations-internationales/latin_amerique_americamerique_latine/2020-04-02-lima_group-groupe_lima.aspx?lang=eng (accessed 31 July 2021).
while being broadly in agreement with Washington on the main objectives. Canadian foreign policy toward Venezuela can also be seen as an experiment in ad hoc multilateralism, in a region where Canada has often expressed the desire to be more relevant, without knowing exactly how. That kind of opportunity does not present itself often.

**Parliamentary opposition and public opinion in Canada**

Trudeau’s pugnacious policy toward the Maduro regime followed the path of the previous Conservative government, who had adversarial relations with the governments of both Chávez and Maduro. Canada’s Andean Unit for Democratic Governance was created in October 2009, to back pro-democracy NGOs in the region and especially in Venezuela. An activist Canadian embassy in Caracas awarded human rights prizes (co-sponsored by the Central University of Venezuela) to activists often critical of the Maduro regime. The embassy also designed and financed the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI) in the country, which had a pro-democracy bent, something absent from CFLI projects in Cuba for instance. Prime Minister Harper and a few of his cabinet members at times signalled antipathy toward the Chávez regime. Following Chávez’s death on 5 March 2013, Harper offered condolences but also added, “At this key juncture, I hope the people of Venezuela can now build for themselves a better, brighter future based on the principles of freedom, democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights.” Harper’s message of condolences was perceived in Caracas, and understandably so, as an invitation to seize the moment to liberalize and democratize the country.

In addition to the executive branch, two standing committees of the Canadian parliament (the Sub-Committee on Human Rights and International Development and the Senate Committee on Human Rights) worked on the Venezuela crisis during the Harper years, inviting numerous witnesses from the Venezuelan opposition (including the wife of then-imprisoned opposition leader Leopoldo López, Lilian Tintori).

The case of Venezuela illustrates Brian Bow and David Black’s contention that “[d]ifferences in the way that the two major parties handle foreign policy challenges may be much smaller than they appear and, even where there has been a significant shift that coincides with a change from one party to another, the shift may be better explained by changing circumstances, either ‘out there’ in the world or within Canadian society.”

Even the NDP seemed willing to back Trudeau’s recognition of Guaidó when Hélène

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60. Yvon Grenier, “Emergency and opportunities: Canada and the Venezuela Crisis,” in Gian Luca Gardini and Gonzalo S. Paz, eds., *External Powers in Latin America: Geopolitics between Neo-extractivism and South-South Cooperation* (Routledge, 2021).

61. Sean Kilpatrick, “Chávez’s death brings hope of a better future for Venezuela: PM Harper,” *The Globe and Mail*, 11 May 2018. His comments were deemed “insensitive and impertinent” by Venezuela’s vice-minister for North America, Claudia Salerno. Peter Mazereeuw, “Canada’s diplomatic doghouse,” *The Hill Times* (Ottawa), 15 May 2014. See also Thomas Legler, “Wishful thinking: Democracy promotion in the Americas under Harper,” *International Journal 67*, no. 3 (2012): 601–620.

62. Brian Bow and David Black, “Does politics stop at the water’s edge in Canada? Party and partisanship in Canadian foreign policy,” *International Journal 65*, no. 3 (2008/2009): 11.
Laverdière was the party’s foreign policy critic, but she did not seek re-election in 2019. She was strongly criticized for this position by the party’s base, and seemed to have been hung out to dry by the new leader Jagmeet Singh.

If the Trudeau government ramped up the pressure on Maduro, it is conceivably because of the deepening of the Venezuela crisis during his term, not because it reached a different conclusion than his predecessor about the evolving nature of the regime in place. The Conservatives have not opposed Trudeau’s hawkish (neoconservative?) policy on Venezuela, and there is no reason to think that Canada’s position would have been substantially different had Harper’s Conservatives won the 2015 election.

Electorally, there is not much to be gained or lost for the Liberals. Unlike Mexico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic, Venezuela is not a popular destination for Canadian tourists. According to the dated 2016 census, there are 674,640 Canadians of Latin American origins in the country. Only 26,345 of them came from Venezuela. For a comparison, more than one million Canadians claim Ukrainian roots, a fact that helps explains bipartisan support for a bold pro-Ukraine foreign policy. Still, there are some Venezuelan-Canadian voices supporting the opposition (for instance the Canada Venezuela Democracy Forum), and former Liberal MP and justice minister Irwin Cotler served as counsel to opposition leader (and political prisoner at the time) Leopoldo López. He was part of the panel that recommended that the situation in Venezuela be referred to the ICC in May 2018. Coming from the other side, there have been some voices in the media and the NDP opposing Trudeau and Freeland’s policy as well. But there was no major controversy in the public opinion over this policy.

**Conclusion**

This article presents a model that could yield interesting results looking at variations in HRD policy toward nondemocratic countries with either weak indicators of crisis (Russia), weak or no democratic opposition (e.g., Syria and Yemen), or both (e.g., China and Saudi Arabia). In most nondemocratic countries, there is in fact no real opportunity for democratization, and therefore no reasonable opportunity to prioritize HRD in foreign policy.

Nowadays, Venezuela features the strongest evidence of the two sets of opportunities identified in the introduction. In recent history, South Africa in the final period of apartheid (early 1990s), as well as Tunisia and Egypt during the Arab Spring (2012) fit the bill. Egypt is particularly interesting because the apparently deep pool of Western sympathy for dictator Hosni Mubarak quickly evaporated with the eruption of a political crisis and the surge of an opposition with some democratic credentials. The rapid downfall of Mubarak, who was abandoned by his army, forced Western governments’ hands. The literature on transition from authoritarian rule to democracy is pretty clear on the importance of internal divisions within the ruling elite. Such divisions never materialized in Venezuela around 2017–2018, when the Maduro regime appeared to be weaker and more fractious than it turned out to be.
To further give the model a preliminary test, one could take a quick look at Canadian HRD policy toward Cuba and Nicaragua, for two reasons. First, according to relevant indexes (e.g., The Economist Democracy Index, BTI, Freedom House, and V-Dem), they represent the other two full-fledged dictatorships in the continent. Second, the three cases exemplify an interesting range of Canadian HRD policies, along the line identified in the model, that shows how ideology is not that important in determining Ottawa’s response.

Cuba is the oldest dictatorship in the Americas. It is demonstrably more authoritarian than Venezuela by design, but Canada never pushed very hard for HRD there. The country has been stable for decades (until July 2021 at least), with no opportunity for democratization on the island, and no appetite in the international community, least of all in the Americas, to submit it to a push for regime change. There are some Canadian investments in the island. The US has learned long ago to accept and indeed benefit from Canada’s friendly relations with Cuba. There is also a symbolic factor at play. In a speech at the University of Havana on 16 November 2016, Prime Minister Trudeau not only stated that Canada has “always been a steadfast and unflinching friend to Cuba,” but also declared that Canadian policy toward Cuba is “one of the ways we reassure ourselves that we are our own country.”

Quite a lament for a nation. Cuba is such a fixture of our diplomatic landscape that in June of 2019, Foreign Minister Freeland said, referring to Venezuela, that “[w]ith one voice, we must make it abundantly clear to the international community that the existence of a dictatorship in the Americas will not be tolerated.” How effortless it was to forget that Cubans have been ruled by dictators since Fulgencio Batista’s coup in 1952.

The example of Nicaragua falls a few notches below Venezuela in terms of Canada cranking up pressure. In 2018, during what was dubbed in Nicaragua as “la crisis” (the crisis), up to 450 demonstrators were killed by security forces. Canada responded by suspending direct aid and imposing sanctions on nine key members of the Ortega government, using the Special Economic Measures Act also invoked to sanction Venezuelan officials. The Ortega regime was no less authoritarian before “the crisis,” so that sudden change of events made the difference. Apart from sanctions, Ottawa went no further than calling for “dialogue” between the government and the opposition, and diplomatic relations were maintained. The OAS (and Canada within this institution) continues to condemn Ortega’s authoritarian policies and actions, most recently its anti-democratic “Law for the Defense of the Rights of the People to Independence, Sovereignty and Self-Determination for Peace.” But there is no momentum in the hemisphere or beyond to expand the purview of the Lima Group to include Nicaragua. There is no interim president or opposition leader to be “recognized” either.

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63. See https://web.archive.org/web/20161118130006/https://www.cpac.ca/en/programs/headline-politics/ episodes/49596956/ (accessed 31 July 2021).
64. GAC, “Address by Foreign Minister to open 10th Lima Group meeting,” Ottawa, Ontario, 4 February 2019.
65. GAC, “Canada imposes sanctions on Nicaraguan officials,” news release, Ottawa, Ontario, 21 June 2019.
66. See “Statement from the OAS General Secretariat on Nicaragua,” 21 December 2020, https://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=E-127/20 (accessed 31 July 2021).
In sum, the case of Venezuela is exceptional. One should not expect the Canadian government to launch democratic crusades on all continents, especially if this experiment fails to bear the fruits it hoped for. What the case of Venezuela certainly shows is that time is of the essence. “Opportunities,” like “crises,” do not last forever.67 On 8 January 2021, in the wake of the fraudulent legislative elections of the previous month, the European Union announced that it “can no longer legally recognize Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaidó as the country’s legitimate head of state after he lost his position as head of parliament.”68 It still does not recognize Maduro as the legitimate president, but for how long? With or without opportunities, defending freedom and human dignity remains the duty of every self-respecting country. When and how to do that, within reason, is always a tough call.

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67. GAC is evidently aware of this reality. See “An interview with Michael Grant, assistant deputy minister for the Americas at Global Affairs Canada,” Global Americans, 20 February 2020, in the series “Two Gringos with Question,” https://theglobalamericans.org/2020/02/an-interview-with-michael-grant-assistant-deputy-minister-for-the-americas-at-global-affairs-canada/ (accessed 31 July 2021).

68. Robin Emmett, “EU no longer acknowledges Venezuela’s Guaidó as interim president,” Reuters, 6 January 2021, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-election-eu/eu-no-longer-acknowledges-venezuelas-guaido-as-interim-president-idUSKBN29B2A9 (accessed 8 August 2021). As if to make amends, the EU imposed sanctions on 19 senior Venezuelan officials, taking the number of Venezuelans blacklisted by the bloc to fifty-five. Robin Emott, “EU hits 19 Venezuelans with sanctions over December Election,” Reuters, 22 February 2021. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-politics-eu-idUSKBN2AM22F (accessed 8 August 2021).