

Pompeo calls for kicking Venezuela out of OAS and more sanctions

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Monday called for Venezuela to be suspended from the Organization of American States for crushing democracy and causing a humanitarian crisis that has driven millions of people from the country.

Pompeo's remarks at the opening of the OAS General Assembly reflected a renewed push to increase the economic and diplomatic cost of what Pompeo called the "dismantling of democracy" under President Nicolás Maduro.

"That suspension is not a goal unto itself," Pompeo said. "But it would show the OAS backs up its words with action and would send a powerful signal to the Maduro regime — only real elections will allow your government to be included in the family of nations."

Vice President Pence also called for the suspension of the "Maduro dictatorship" from the organization at a White House reception for OAS members Monday night, in advance of a Tuesday vote.

Pence declared that the "once-great Venezuela is now a failed state."

The U.S. officials' call for Venezuela's suspension from the premier political institution representing the Western Hemisphere is shaping up to be a rush to expel the country before it withdraws on its own. A year ago, Venezuela said it would withdraw from the organization because of its attacks on the country's sovereignty, but the process will not take effect until next April.

Appearing on Venezuelan state TV, Maduro struck an equally scornful tone Monday.

"We denounce the OAS and we're leaving the OAS," he said. "From the ministry of colonies, we're leaving. We ratify that we're leaving. Thirteen of the 24 months we have to wait to make our request to leave effective, and that day we will have a national party. When Venezuela leaves the OAS we will have a party, of the people. We will make it a holiday for the entire country."

Suspension from the OAS would have little practical effect.

“This suspension only works against a democratic government that cares about its image in front of neighbors. That doesn’t appear to be Maduro’s case,” said Mariano d’Alba, a Venezuelan lawyer who specializes in international affairs. “In terms of pressure, I don’t think there’ll be much change.”

Although previous efforts to pressure Maduro have failed, the anger by the United States and other countries in the region sharpened after Maduro won reelection last month in what was widely regarded as a vote marked by low turnout and improprieties. Pompeo has labeled it a sham, and the United States and other nations have refused to recognize it.

“The so-called election held two weeks ago only ratified a sad truth,” Pence said in prepared remarks at the White House reception. “Under Maduro, Venezuela’s democracy is dead.”

OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro has been a critic of Maduro and has urged stern action against his government for the past two years. Venezuela has maintained enough support from a handful of countries in the OAS — most of which have gotten subsidies from Venezuela for years — to block previous attempts to suspend it.

The United States has increasingly turned to sanctions against Venezuelan government and oil officials, and Pompeo urged other OAS countries to do the same.

“In addition to suspension, I call on member states to apply additional pressure on the Maduro regime with financial sanctions and diplomatic isolation until such time as it takes the actions necessary to return genuine democracy and provide people desperately needed access to international humanitarian aid,” he said.

Venezuelan Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza criticized the OAS as part of a “corporation” led by the United States to undermine Venezuela’s sovereignty.

“We have moral authority. You do not have moral authority,” he said, citing U.S. invasions of Panama in 1989 and the Dominican Republic in 1965.

Arreaza accused the United States of fostering violence that has accompanied protests and the deprivation caused by sanctions and mocked U.S. offers of

humanitarian aid.

“You impose economic sanctions, and then you offer your help to wash your hands,” he said. “The U.S. has been perpetrating a coup d’état against Venezuela for 20 years.”

Vowing not to buckle under the pressure, Arreaza added, “We are free. We are sovereign. And no imperialist will intervene in our country and hinder our people from voting for their own authorities and having their own democracy.”

Erika Guevara-Rosas, Americas director at Amnesty International, welcomed the tough stance against the Venezuelan government but questioned whether there is the political will to push for change.

“We believe this Cold War rhetoric should not be utilized,” she said. “It gives Maduro justification when he says, ‘We are going to be attacked by the United States,’ and it doesn’t have impact on the protection of human rights.”

Rachelle Krygier contributed to this report.

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