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Venezuela Tests Europe's Moral Credibility



Exiled Venezuelans living in Argentina celebrate at the Obelisk in Buenos Aires on January 3, 2026, after U.S. forces captured Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro.

TOMAS CUESTA / AFP

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- [Emmanuel Navon](#)
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The United States' decision to act decisively against Nicolás Maduro has already triggered a familiar chorus of condemnation. Once again, the language of "international law" is being weaponized not to defend human dignity but to protect tyranny.

This moment is not unprecedented. In 1989, the United States intervened militarily in Panama to remove Manuel Noriega, a narco-dictator who had turned a sovereign state

into a criminal enterprise. Then, as now, critics warned of catastrophic precedents. Then, as now, they were wrong.

History judged that intervention not as an act of imperialism, but as the overdue enforcement of accountability when all other mechanisms had failed. President George H. W. Bush understood what many of today's Western leaders appear to have forgotten: that law divorced from justice degenerates into farce.

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of the current backlash is not that authoritarian regimes condemned Washington, but which ones did.

Among the loudest voices invoking "international law" are Iran, whose regime executes dissidents and arms terrorist proxies; Russia, whose invasion of Ukraine shredded every foundational principle of post-1945 order; and Hamas, a genocidal organization that massacres civilians as a matter of doctrine.

They were joined by China, Cuba, Nicaragua, and other serial violators of human rights: states that invoke legality only when it shields repression, corruption, and impunity. That these regimes suddenly present themselves as guardians of international norms should not alarm us. It should clarify the stakes.

When dictatorships cite international law, it is not to uphold it. It is to hollow it out.

More troubling than the reaction of autocracies, however, is the studied evasiveness of Western democracies. The European Union, the United Kingdom, and other Western democracies too often retreat into abstract legalism, issuing statements indistinguishable in tone from those of tyrannies.

By doing so, they do not defend the international order. They blur the moral line between those who abuse it and those who are meant to uphold it.

Invoking "international law" in the same breath as regimes that systematically violate it does not elevate legality; it degrades it. Worse, it plays directly into the hands of a United Nations system increasingly captured by majoritarian hypocrisy, where resolutions substitute for responsibility and paralysis masquerades as prudence.

This dilemma is not new. Winston Churchill, confronting the existential crises of the twentieth century, articulated it with characteristic clarity:

Acting in the name of the Covenant, and as virtual mandatories of the League and all it stands for, we have a right, indeed are bound in duty, to abrogate for a space some of the conventions of the very laws we seek to consolidate and reaffirm. ... The letter of the law must not in supreme emergency obstruct those who are charged with its protection and enforcement. ... Humanity, rather than legality, must be our guide."

Churchill did not argue for lawlessness. He argued for moral hierarchy: for recognizing that legal frameworks exist to serve civilization, not to provide permanent asylum to those who destroy it.

Venezuela under Maduro is not a functioning sovereign state. It is a kleptocratic dictatorship that has dismantled democratic institutions, criminalized opposition, driven millions into exile, and entrenched itself through violence and transnational crime.

If the removal of such a regime after years of sanctions, negotiations, and UN posturing still triggers Western handwringing about procedure rather than principle, then the problem is not American action. It is Western abdication.

This is a moment of choice. Democracies can either defend a living international order rooted in responsibility and accountability or continue hiding behind a dead letter of law that tyrants invoke with a straight face and a loaded gun.

Those who equate democratic action with tyrannical abuse in the name of international law will not be remembered as cautious but as complicit.

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