

**THE VENEZUELA–UNITED STATES ISSUE: SANCTIONS,  
SOVEREIGNTY AND INTERNATIONAL LAW**

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**I. Introduction**

Relations between Venezuela and the United States have deteriorated significantly over the past two decades, transforming from economic partnership to political confrontation. Venezuela possesses the world's largest proven oil reserves, making it strategically important in global energy markets. Disagreements over governance, economic policy, and foreign influence have led to diplomatic isolation, sweeping economic sanctions, and deep humanitarian distress.

From an international law perspective, the Venezuela–US issue raises critical questions about the legality of unilateral sanctions, external interference in domestic affairs, and the balance between political objectives and humanitarian consequences.

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**II. Historical Background of Venezuela–US Relations**

For much of the twentieth century, Venezuela maintained cooperative relations with the United States, particularly as a major oil supplier. This relationship changed following the rise of left-leaning governments and state control over oil resources. Political tensions intensified under successive Venezuelan administrations that pursued policies critical of US influence in Latin America.

The conflict escalated further with contested elections and competing claims to political legitimacy, leading to international division over recognition of leadership in Venezuela.

### **III. Political Crisis and Competing Claims to Authority**

The political crisis in Venezuela deepened when the legitimacy of presidential elections was challenged domestically and internationally. The United States and several allied states refused to recognise the sitting government and instead supported an alternative leadership claim.

This episode highlighted the controversial issue of **recognition of governments** in international law, particularly where external political considerations influence recognition decisions.

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### **IV. Economic Sanctions and Their Legal Basis**

The United States imposed extensive economic and financial sanctions on Venezuela, targeting:

- A. State oil revenues
- B. Financial transactions
- C. Government officials and institutions

These sanctions were justified by the US as measures to promote democratic governance and protect human rights. However, they were imposed unilaterally rather than through collective international mechanisms, raising questions about their compatibility with international legal norms.

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### **V. Impact of Sanctions on Venezuela**

Economic sanctions have had profound consequences for Venezuela's economy and population:

- A. Severe reduction in oil exports and revenue

- B. Shortages of food, medicine, and essential goods
- C. Currency collapse and inflation
- D. Mass migration of citizens

The humanitarian impact of sanctions has been widely debated, with critics arguing that economic pressure disproportionately affects civilians rather than political leadership.

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## **VI. Oil Politics and Strategic Interests**

Oil remains central to the Venezuela–US dispute. Venezuela’s vast petroleum reserves have long attracted foreign interest, and control over oil production and exports has significant geopolitical implications. Restrictions on Venezuela’s ability to trade oil internationally have directly contributed to economic decline, reinforcing the link between natural resources and international conflict.

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## **VII. International Law Issues Involved**

### **A. Unilateral Sanctions**

International law traditionally favours collective action through international institutions. Unilateral sanctions imposed without multilateral authorisation raise concerns regarding economic coercion and legality under international norms.

### **B. Humanitarian Considerations**

Sanctions that cause widespread suffering raise questions under international humanitarian and human rights law, particularly regarding access to food, healthcare, and basic necessities.

### **C. Recognition and Non-Intervention**

External recognition of alternative political authorities in Venezuela has intensified debate on the limits of external involvement in internal political disputes.

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### **VIII. Role of International and Regional Actors**

Various international and regional bodies have attempted to mediate the Venezuelan crisis. Some states support dialogue and negotiated settlement, while others maintain pressure through sanctions and diplomatic isolation. The lack of consensus has hindered effective resolution.

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### **IX. Critical Evaluation**

While concerns about governance and democratic legitimacy in Venezuela are significant, the reliance on unilateral economic sanctions as a primary tool raises serious legal and ethical issues. Sanctions risk undermining civilian welfare and destabilising regional security. Long-term resolution requires diplomatic engagement, respect for international legal principles, and prioritisation of humanitarian outcomes.

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### **X. Conclusion**

The Venezuela–United States issue illustrates the tensions between political objectives, economic power, and international legal order. While framed as a dispute over democracy and governance, the conflict is deeply intertwined with strategic and economic interests, particularly oil. The use of unilateral sanctions and contested recognition practices

challenges established principles of international law and highlights the need for multilateral, lawful, and humanitarian-centred approaches to resolving international disputes.

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### **Footnotes**

1. United Nations reports on the humanitarian situation in Venezuela.
2. Mark Weisbrot & Jeffrey Sachs, *Economic Sanctions as Collective Punishment: The Case of Venezuela* (Center for Economic and Policy Research).
3. United States Treasury Department, Sanctions Programs on Venezuela.
4. Philippe Sands, *Principles of International Law* (Cambridge University Press).
5. B.S. Chimni, *International Law and World Order*.
6. OPEC data on Venezuela's oil reserves and production.
7. Inter-American Commission on Human Rights reports on Venezuela.