

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 1, 2016

The Honorable John F. Kerry
Secretary of State
US Department of State
2201 C St. NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Kerry,

We write regarding our grave concerns over Undersecretary of State Thomas Shannon's recent trip to Venezuela, which was apparently undertaken at your express direction. While Mr. Shannon noted briefly in his press availability on June 24th that he met with "civil society representatives and opposition leaders" in Caracas, he also admitted he had gotten no "concessions" from the government of Venezuela and was far more forthcoming with details on his engagement with President Nicolás Maduro and his regime, including his efforts to establish a "dialogue" with them that would "build bridges" and "create common understanding."

It is inexplicable that you would voluntarily favor Maduro with such a high-level, official delegation to Caracas at this time, especially as Mr. Shannon's previous visits in April and May, 2015, resulted in no discernable improvement in the Venezuelan President's behavior. Following in the footsteps of his predecessor, Hugo Chavez, his disastrous economic policies have brought his once proud and prosperous nation to its knees, with citizens scrounging in the streets for the most basic necessities of life. Maduro's anti-American rhetoric has been every bit as offensive as Chavez' was. He is threatening to dissolve Venezuela's duly elected National Assembly. His human rights violations are well documented and have been penalized by the United States. Given the dire predicament the Maduro regime has created for itself, the government of the United States might have set requirements *before* Mr. Shannon's visit, such as the unconditional release of the dozens of political prisoners languishing in Maduro's prisons including opposition leader Leopoldo López, who has served two years of a thirteen-year sentence on trumped up charges, former Caracas Mayor Antonio Ledezma and former presidential candidate Manuel Rosales.¹

Secretary Kerry, if we have learned anything from the deteriorating condition of human rights in Cuba following the Obama administration's engagement with Fidel and Raul Castro, it is that unconditional outreach to totalitarian regimes does little to curb their human rights abuses. Rather, it emboldens them to escalate their oppression without fear of any reprisal from the United States. In fact, Maduro appears to have detained two additional opposition figures, Francisco "Pancho" Marquez Lara and Gabriel San Miguel, either while Mr. Shannon was still in Venezuela or immediately after his departure.

¹ Holly K. Sonneland, "Explainer: Who Are Venezuela's Political Prisoners?", AS-COA, June 29, 2016, http://www.as-coa.org/articles/explainer-who-are-venezuelas-political-prisoners?utm_content=buffer25695&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer.

Rather than propping up Maduro's failed and oppressive regime, now might be the moment for the United States to stand unequivocally with the political opposition forces he is trying to silence. For this reason, we would like some additional details regarding your outreach policy towards Caracas before any of the additional meetings Mr. Shannon said he hoped to set occur, and before there is any exchange of ambassadors as Maduro proposed:

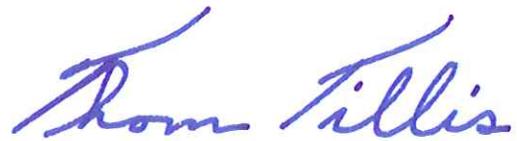
1. Who, exactly, are the "civil society representatives and opposition leaders" with whom Mr. Shannon met?
2. What sort of assurances did you get from the Maduro regime that they would improve their human rights record?
3. Did Mr. Shannon impress upon Maduro consequences for failing to improve this record, such as expulsion from the Organization of American States and/or sustained public support from the United States for a recall referendum on his presidency before the end of 2016?
4. How would the "constructive bilateral relationship" between the United States and Maduro proposed by Mr. Shannon function absent any changes in his oppressive and authoritarian Socialist policies?
5. How do you imagine the legitimization of Maduro's rule represented by Mr. Shannon's visit will improve the plight of the Venezuelan people?

If for any reason you consider this information sensitive we would of course be available to receive a classified briefing on this important issue. We look forward to your response no later than July 15, 2016.

Sincerely,



Ted Cruz
United States Senator



Thom Tillis
United States Senator