

How the campaign to free Venezuelan political prisoner Alex Saab succeeded

written by Roger D. Harris
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Alex Saab was freed from US captivity in what Venezuelan Prof. Maria Victor Paez described as “a triumph of Venezuelan diplomacy.” The diplomat had been [imprisoned](#) for trying to bring humanitarian supplies to Venezuela in legal international trade but in circumvention of Washington’s illegal economic coercive measures, also known as [sanctions](#).

Negotiated prisoner exchange

In a prisoner exchange, Venezuela [released](#) ten US citizens and some other nationals to free Alex Saab after his over three years of imprisonment.

Saab’s [plane landed](#) in Venezuela on December 20. He was tearfully [greeted](#) by his family, friends, and Venezuela’s *primera combatiente* Cilia Flores, wife of the president. Shortly after, President Nicolás Maduro made a triumphal public address with Alex Saab at his side at the presidential palace.

Unlike Maduro, US President Biden made no such public address with his releasees beside him. Had he done so, he would have had to stand with “Fat Leonard” Francis, who had escaped US captivity after being convicted in a major US Navy [corruption case](#) implicating some sixty admirals. The US badly [wanted](#) him back in their custody. He knew too much about officials in high places.

The White House has so far [declined to reveal](#) the full list of those released. John Kirby, US Security Council spokesperson, [tweeted](#), “Sometimes tough decisions have to be made to rescue Americans overseas.” Among the others released were [mercenaries](#) Luke Deman and Airan Berry, who were captured after the “[Bay of Pigs](#)” attempt to assassinate the Venezuelan president.

The US government would have liked nothing more than to have locked Alex Saab up and thrown away the key. And for a while, it looked like that was going to happen. Saab’s crack legal team had tried unsuccessfully to free him on the grounds

that he was a [diplomat](#) who, under the Vienna Convention for Diplomatic Relations, is supposed to enjoy absolute immunity from arrest. Although the US is a signatory to the convention, Uncle Sam saw no reason to abide by international law.

The US Department of Justice lawyers [argued](#), in effect, that because the US does not recognize the legitimacy of the democratically elected government in Venezuela, it certainly does not have to accept its diplomats. Although appeals were made, the US government simply delayed the case.

In short, the likelihood of achieving justice from the US justice system was slim. The last hope for freeing Alex Saab was a prisoner exchange. And that turned out to be the route to freedom.

How the campaign succeeded

The saga of Alex Saab and his ultimate emancipation is similar to the campaign to [free the Cuban 5](#). The five had infiltrated terrorist groups in the Miami area, which were planning attacks on Cuba. When the Cuban authorities notified the FBI in 1998 of these illegal actions being planned on US soil, the US government instead arrested the five Cuban heroes, as they became to be known in their homeland.

Cuban President Fidel Castro vowed that the five would be freed, and they were. Two of the five eventually completed their prison sentences. Then in 2014, the remaining three were released in a prisoner exchange after a successful [international campaign](#).

Like the campaign to free the Cuban 5, the FreeAlexSaab campaign rested on four legs: the remarkable resoluteness of Alex Saab himself, the mobilization of the entire Venezuelan nation on his behalf, an international movement, and the support and involvement of his family.

Alex Saab's resoluteness was exemplary. Unlike many prisoners, Saab had a get-out-

of-jail-free card that he could have played if he had chosen to do so. He did not.

As US officials admitted, Saab was a high value asset because he had information that the US security state wanted regarding contacts and means to circumvent the illegal coercive economic measures. All he had to do was sing and renounce Venezuelan President Maduro and the Bolivarian Revolution. But he did not, even under extreme pressure. Not simply pressure, but he was tortured while imprisoned in Cabe Verde.

In his emotional [welcoming speech](#) to Alex Saab, President Maduro remarked on Saab's Palestinian heritage, noting that came with a capacity to resist. Venezuela has been among the Latin American nations [most critical](#) of the Israeli assault on Palestine.

The second pillar to the successful campaign was the mobilization of the Venezuelan nation behind freeing their national hero. This mobilization extended from the grassroots to the head of state.

Maduro noted that even while Saab was languishing in jail, the diplomat's efforts had not been in vain. Although Saab was behind bars for 1280 days, the Venezuelan people were benefiting from the vaccines, food, and fuel that Saab had arranged to be delivered, circumventing the US blockade. Sharing the podium with them at the welcoming speech was a high-ranking Venezuelan general who, hearing this, cried.

Efforts of friends and family

The third element in the successful effort was launching an international campaign to #FreeAlexSaab. All over the world, friends of Venezuela's sovereignty united to hold actions demanding his freedom.

Out of Vancouver, Canada, [Hands Off Venezuela!](#) conducted monthly online virtual picket lines featuring guest speakers on the Saab case. British rock star [Roger](#)

[Waters](#) spoke out for Alex Saab's freedom, as did distinguished Nigerian lawyer [Femi Falana](#), United Nations special rapporteurs [Alfred-Maurice de Zayas](#) based in Switzerland and [Alena Douhan](#) based in Belarus, international law expert Dan Kovalik at the University of Pittsburgh, and Puerto Rican national hero and former political prisoner Oscar Lopez Rivera. Also weighing in on the injustice to Alex Saab were the American Association of Jurists, the National Lawyers Guild, United Nations [Human Rights Committee](#), and the African Bar Association, along with the Economic Community of West African States' (ECOWAS) [Court of Justice](#).

Head of the North American Free Alex Saab Campaign, Venezuelan-American William Camacaro commented that this was an important victory for President Maduro and by extension the larger Bolivarian Revolution. An already fractious opposition in Venezuela, he observed, has gotten even more divided while the Chavista movement is more unified going into the 2024 presidential election year.

Parallel campaigns for a prisoner exchange were waged on behalf of US citizens imprisoned in Venezuela. Prominent among those drives were the friends of [Eyvin Hernández](#). The Los Angeles public defender had been arrested in March 2022 when he illegally entered Venezuela from Colombia. The Hernández campaign waged a strong effort reaching [government officials](#) and doing effective lobbying.

Speaking of government officials, the removal of disgraced Democrat Robert Menendez as chair of the powerful Senate Committee on Foreign Relations eliminated a significant obstacle to the prisoner exchange. Surprisingly, Maduro revealed that a deal to free Saab had previously been [made with Trump](#), but when Biden won the election, they had to start again from scratch.



The fourth and indispensable pillar for the successful campaign was Alex Saab's family, who had been targeted by the US but stood firm and supportive. The day that Saab's son turned eighteen, the US slapped him with sanctions along with his uncles and other family members. Camilla Fabri de Saab, the former prisoner's wife, led the effort even though she was a young mother with two young children.

As would be expected, Fabri was initially devastated by her husband's imprisonment. She too was targeted and even her parents in Italy were hit. But out of adversity came strength. Fabri took the lead in uniting the many pieces of the campaign and the legal effort. With no exaggeration, she became a major international leader. She was appointed by Maduro to be on the sensitive negotiating team meeting with members of the Venezuelan opposition in Mexico City to retrieve some of Venezuela's assets that had been illegally seized by the US.

Fabri's moving [video](#), made just five days before her husband's release, was about what the holidays would be like without him. As it turned out, this will be a more joyous holiday season for all the prisoners freed in this historic exchange and their families. The release of Alex Saab is a victory for Venezuelan sovereignty and shared

with the third of humanity still under [US sanctions](#).

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