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Relativism: the silent threat to democracy

Ramón Cardozo Álvarez

The title of the most recent annual democracy report from the V-Dem Institute, 25 Years of Autocratization: Democracy Trumped?[1], is a clear warning sign. This report, published by the prestigious project at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, warns that the so-called "third wave of autocratization," underway since the beginning of the 21st century, shows no signs of slowing and has not yet reached its peak.

The data presented in V-Dem 2025 are striking: in 2010, 13 countries were undergoing autocratization; by 2020, the number had tripled to 34; and by 2024, it had risen to 45. For the first time in more than two decades, the world counts more autocracies (91) than democracies (88). Moreover, nearly three out of every four people on the planet (72%) now live under autocratic regimes —the highest level since 1978[2].

A vast body of specialized literature has documented multiple explanatory factors behind this global decline in democracy[3].

1 Marina Nord, David Altman, Fabio Angiolillo, Tiago Fernandes, Ana Good God, & Staffan I. Lindberg, *Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization–Democracy Trumped?,* University of Gothenburg, V-Dem Institute, 2025.

2 Idem, pp. 6, 18.

3 Nancy Bermeo, "On democratic backsliding", *Journal of Democracy,* 2016, 27(1),5-19, https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012

Among the most prominent are extreme polarization, political disaffection, the weakening of social capital, erosion of institutional trust, the rise of populist leaderships, and processes of autocratization within the democratic system.

There is, however, a factor embedded in the cultural background of several of these autocratizing dynamics whose effects, in our view, have not been sufficiently taken into account: the premise that no shared truths exist, only individual perspectives. This logic —now permeating both public discourse and political practice— is what we refer to here as "relativism."

This dimension of the problem has received little attention in studies on global democratic backsliding, partly because of the difficulty of operationalizing and empirically measuring relativism as a philosophical-normative category, and partly because of the modern tendency to develop political science and political philosophy as separate disciplines with limited spaces for dialogue.

This article offers a general approach to the problem of relativism as a silent threat to democracy. Its purpose is to show that this philosophical current operates as a background factor that significantly contributes to contemporary autocratizing dynamics. Ignoring this cultural and philosophical dimension leaves the diagnosis of democratic decline incomplete and limits the possibility of articulating a deeper political response. An additional objective is to serve as a resource for the training of political cadres, hence the pedagogical tone adopted.

Anna Lührmann, & Staffan I. Lindberg, "A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it?", *Democratization*, 2019, 26(7), 1095–1113.
Larry Diamond, "Democratic regression in comparative perspective: Scope, methods, and causes", *Democratization*, 2020, 28(1), 22–42, 2021.

1. The establishment of social order: a fundamental task of politics

Since classical philosophy, Aristotle affirmed that the human being, social by nature, possesses an intrinsic inclination toward transcendence: to move beyond oneself in order to know reality and relate to others. Only in living together with others can a person fully develop his or her capacities, both physical and spiritual. Life in community is indispensable for attaining a truly human existence.[4]

The need for such order arises from the multiplicity of interests and the inherent contingency of social life. Without an organizing principle to harmonize the diverse human actions and aspirations, the achievement of common ends —which justify the very existence of society— would be impossible.

For this reason, Caldera argues that the establishment and preservation of order is the fundamental task of politics: "To bring order to social life, not in everything but precisely in what we share in common —that is, what concerns existence itself, the preservation and development of society."[5]

2. The foundation of social order: a core of shared values

Social order cannot be sustained by force alone. Aristotle already emphasized, when discussing civic friendship, that what holds the polis together is not coercion, but a concord among citizens founded on a deep consensus regarding the ends of the community and the means to achieve them [6] In the same line,

4 Aristotle, *Política,* (M. G. Valdés, Trad.), Editorial Gredos, 1997.

5 Ídem, p. 7.

6 Aristotle, *Ética Nicomáquea,* (J. Palli , Trad.), Editorial Gredos, 1998.

Pope John XXIII asserts in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris*: "a regime which governs solely or mainly by means of threats and intimidation or promises of reward, provides men with no effective incentive to work for the common good."[7]

Thus, for communal life to be possible, a core of shared values is necessary to give cohesion to society.[8] Without this common foundation, any political order is reduced to a forced coexistence, incapable over time of generating the bonds of unity and cohesion required to transcend particular interests, overcome internal tensions, and achieve the highest ends of the community.[9]

3. The true good of the human being

But what are these values that can and should be shared by all, and why do they deserve such recognition? This question leads us to the very heart of ethical reflection.

The classical tradition offers an illuminating answer. As Aristotle teaches in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the proper good of the human being consists in that which allows him or her to achieve their telos, or ultimate end, fully actualizing the potentials inherent in their rational, free, and social nature.[10] From this teleological perspective, the true goods of the human being are those that enable a person to bring out the best in themselves and attain their full flourishing.

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7 Juan XXIII, *Pacem in terris,* Encyclical Letter, 1963, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/es/encyclicals/documents/hf_jxxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html

8 Aristotle, *Política...* 1997, III, 1280b–1281ª.

9 Rafael Tomás Caldera, *El poder y la justicia para jóvenes políticos,* pp. 4-18.

10 Aristotle, *Ética Nicomáquea...*, EN, I, 7, 1097b.

The knowledge of human nature —the truth about what a human being is— thus becomes the key to identifying which goods are truly indispensable for the full development of one's capacities. If it is recognized that the human being is, by nature, rational, free, and social, it follows that their most precious goods must necessarily be connected to the cultivation of these essential dimensions.

From this anthropological premise, it becomes clear why certain values possess universal and objective validity and constitute the true goods of the human being. For example, human dignity emerges as a fundamental value for political coexistence, recognizing the intrinsic and inalienable worth of every person as a rational and free being; responsible freedom appears as an indispensable condition for moral perfection, for only through the free use of reason and will can a person attain their full potential; and justice and solidarity manifest as guiding principles of social relations, because human beings require frameworks that ensure equity and mutual support to achieve the common good.[11]

Ultimately, each of these values expresses the rational recognition of an objective good aimed at human perfection. Since they derive from human nature —that is, from the essential characteristics that define us as rational, free, and social beings— these values possess a universal character and present themselves as objective requirements for a person to achieve their full potential. It is precisely on this basis that the possibility of a common foundation for social life and of a legitimate and stable political order rests.

11 *Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace,* Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004, nn. 160–163, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_sp.html

4. Relativism: the radical objection to truth and the true good

However, this conception of social order —grounded in the truth about human nature and its authentic goods— faces a fundamental challenge: relativism. This philosophical stance denies that universal truths exist concerning human nature and instead maintains that what we call the "true goods of the human being" are nothing more than variable, contingent cultural constructions, dependent on particular historical contexts.

Although the term "relativism" is of relatively recent coinage (19th century), positions and doctrines with traits akin to contemporary relativism date back to classical antiquity[12]. Protagoras, in the 5th century BCE, expressed his famous maxim, "Man is the measure of all things"[13],), anticipating the idea that truth depends on the individual perspective. At the beginning of the Modern Age, Michel de Montaigne continued this line of thought by emphasizing the influence of customs on the notion of truth. In "Of Cannibals", he warned that European judgments about the "barbaric" were conditioned by the Europeans' own cultural viewpoint.[14]

Later, the influence of skepticism[15] in 18th-century Enlightenment thought laid the groundwork for Friedrich Nietzsche, who radicalized this perspective by denying the existence of absolute

12 Maria Baghramian, "Relativism", in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* 2020, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/relativism/

13 Plato, *Theaetetus*, 1993, 152a.

14 Michel de Montaigne, "The Cannibals" (original work published in 1580), in J. B. Brañes (Ed., Trad.), *Ensayos,* Acantilado, Barcelona, 2007.

15 An outlook that questions whether universal and definitive truths can ever be attained.

truth and asserting that "there are no facts, only interpretations."[16] In the 20th century, postmodern currents —led by Michel Foucault— conceived discourses of truth not as reflections of an objective reality, but as historical constructions inseparable from relations of power,[17]), while authors such as Thomas Kuhn extended relativism into the realm of science.[18]

After its impact on philosophy and the theory of science —with authors such as Thomas Kuhn, who extended relativism into the realm of scientific paradigms— these ideas also spread to other disciplines. For example, in cultural anthropology, relativism became a highly influential current: Franz Boas argued that culture constitutes the fundamental framework for understanding human beings and that all cultures have equal value within their own parameters.[19] Likewise, Melville Herskovits maintained that moral and truth judgments are determined by specific cultural contexts, thereby denying the existence of absolute universal moral norms or truths.[20]

In its contemporary manifestations, we can distinguish three main forms of relativism: epistemological, which denies the possibility of objective knowledge; moral, which rejects the universal validity of ethical norms; and cultural, which reduces truth and values to mere conventions specific to each society.

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16 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Fragmentos póstumos,* Tecnos, Madrid, 2008, Vol. IV (1885-1889).

17 Michel Foucault, "Verdad y poder", in *Microfísica del poder* (J. V. Álvarez-Uría, Trad.) 1992.

18 Thomas Samuel Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,* University of Chicago Press, 1962.

19 Franz Boas, *Race, language and culture,* The University of Chicago Press, 1940.

20 Melville Herskovits, *Man and his works: The science of cultural anthropology,* Alfred A. Knopf, 1947.

The fact that relativism manifests across such diverse fields of knowledge indicates its significant influence today. This breadth suggests that it is not merely a philosophical current, but a mind-set or cultural paradigm that has permeated broad sectors of contemporary society

In this context, it is relevant to examine how this stance has influenced the understanding of the political foundations of our societies, particularly concerning democracy —a topic we will address in the following section.

5. Relativism empties democracy of ethical content and reduces it to procedures

Through the works of authors such as the Austrian jurist Hans Kelsen and the American philosopher Richard Rorty, relativism became prominent throughout the 20th century, shaping the very understanding of the foundations of modern democracy.

In his book On the Essence and Value of Democracy,[21] Kelsen begins with the fundamental premise that "truth and absolute values are inaccessible to human ."[22] Considering that pluralism is an inherent feature of modern democratic societies, he argues that democracy must value "everyone's political will equally."[23] This epistemological equality —derived from the impossibility of accessing absolute political truths— justifies democracy giving all opinions and political doctrines an identical opportunity to express themselves and compete freely.

21 Hans Kelsen, *Esencia y valor de la democracia,* (E. Labor, Ed., R. Luengo Tapia y L. Legaz y Lacambra, Trad.), Editorial Labor, 1934.

22 Idem, p. 156.

23 Idem, pp. 156-157.

From this perspective, the Austrian jurist argues that the most characteristic goods of a democracy —freedom of thought and of the press, tolerance, equal consideration of each individual's political will, protection of opposing minorities, and the organization of state order as a system of general norms— would be incompatible with any political system grounded in the belief in absolute goods and values.

Kelsen's reasoning is as follows: those who regard themselves as bearers of an absolute truth —valid for everyone— would have no rational incentive to submit it to the democratic process of deliberation and majority decision. Instead, they would inevitably tend to impose it authoritatively on those they see as mired in error. For this reason, the Austrian author concludes that "the idea of democracy thus presupposes relativism as its worldview."[24]

This relativist conception of democracy would, in the following decades, find a more radical development in the work of the American philosopher Richard Rorty.[25] From a pragmatic standpoint, he did not limit himself, as Kelsen did, to grounding democracy on the absence of absolute truths; rather, he went further, questioning the very notion of truth as correspondence between our judgments and an objective reality independent of us.[26]

In his book Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, Rorty proposed abandoning the search for ultimate foundations altogether and excluding the notion of truth from the public sphere. He argued that the attempt to establish absolute values and goods is not only

24 Idem, p. 156.

25 Richard Rorty, *Contingencia, ironía y solidaridad,* (A. E. Bixio, Trad.), Paidós, 1991.

26 Idem, p. 20.

impossible but incoherent.[27] Instead, he proposes a pragmatic conception of truth. For him, truth is simply what a community comes to agree upon through conversation and deliberation.[28]

According to Rorty, the values, institutions, and ways of life on which human coexistence rests are radically contingent. That is, they do not derive from universal truths about human nature or absolute moral principles, but are the contingent result of historical processes. This contingency does not mean that values were established arbitrarily or capriciously; rather, they have proven over time to be "useful" in creating societies that most of their members consider desirable places to live. Truth is not something to be discovered; it is something to be constructed.[29]

From this perspective, the American philosopher argues that democracy must be grounded in its utility. Democracy represents the best available tool for negotiating and reaching provisional, workable agreements within a pluralistic society marked by diverse interests and values, thereby enabling peaceful and prosperous coexistence.

Thus, for Rorty, democracy should rest solely on "tolerance" and "solidarity" as its new common creed. Personal convictions are to be kept within the private sphere, while in public life the essential requirement is to accept the contingency of every belief and the impossibility of accessing universal truths.[30] From his

27 According to Rorty, the quest for absolute values is impossible —since no neutral tribunal exists beyond language—and incoherent, because it attempts to justify without presuppositions while inevitably relying on them. Ibid., pp. 25, 215

28 Idem, p. 102.

29 Idem, p. 23.

30 Idem, pp. 18, 86, 110.

perspective, what safeguards peaceful coexistence is not agreement about truth, but the explicit renunciation of it.

The questioning of the metaphysical foundations of democratic values—an inheritance from thinkers such as Kelsen, Rorty, and others—has penetrated deeply into contemporary democratic practice, even though institutional language continues to maintain a universalist rhetoric. From this has emerged a contingent universalism: a set of values proclaimed as universal, yet whose authority is acknowledged as the product of historical, cultural, and political negotiation processes.

From these perspectives, democracy is no longer fundamentally understood as a "way of life" grounded in a stable core of shared values, as Jacques Maritain defended it, but is instead conceived predominantly as a "form of government" aimed at ensuring peaceful coexistence and the institutional channeling of conflict between radically divergent worldviews.

6. Relativism imposes its dictatorship on the contemporary world

Since the mid-20th century, some postwar thinkers such as Eric Voegelin, Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt, and Alasdair MacIntyre began to warn about the risks that moral and epistemic relativism posed to the stability of liberal democracies[31]. However, it was in the last decades of the 20th century that this critique began to acquire a global dimension, thanks to the intellectual and pastoral leadership of Pope John Paul II and the theological

31 Eric Voegelin, E. *The new science of politics,* University of Chicago Press, 1952. Leo Strauss, *Natural right and history,* University of Chicago Press, 1953. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition,* University of Chicago Press, 1958. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After virtue: A study in moral theory.* University of Notre Dame Press, 1981.

and philosophical work of one of his closest collaborators, the German Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.

In 1991, in his encyclical Centesimus annus, John Paul II warned about the dangers facing a democracy that has lost its moral foundation: "if there is no ultimate truth to guide and direct political activity, then ideas and convictions can easily be manipulated for reasons of power. As history demonstrates, a democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism."[32] The Pope's reference to the possibility of a "disguised totalitarianism" operating under the guise of procedural democracy is particularly revealing.

For his part, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger—beginning in the 1990s and closely aligned with the pontificate of John Paul II—developed this critique in multiple writings, lectures, and doctrinal documents.[33] It was he who, in 2005, coined the famous expression "dictatorship of relativism."[34] to characterize this drift in contemporary culture, which had replaced truth with opinion and promoted relativism as the only valid approach in public life.

In his well-known homily of April 18, 2005, delivered during the conclave just days before he was elected Pope, the future Benedict XVI warned that, in the absence of objective truth, humanity ends up subjected to the accidental and the arbitrary: "We are moving toward a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognize anything as definitive and has as its highest

32 John Paul II, *Centesimus annus,* Encyclical Letter, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, n. 46, 1991, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/es/encyclicals/documents/hf_jpii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html

33 Joseph Ratzinger, *Verdad, valores y poder,* Rialp, 1998. "

34 Ratzinger, J., Homily, Mass "Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice," Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005, https://www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_en.html

value one's own ego and one's own desires."[35] In this way, the ultimate criterion of what is "good" or "permissible" becomes whatever an accidental majority —or the dominant cultural elites— arbitrarily consider "acceptable" at a given moment.

Ratzinger argues that by denying all truth accessible to reason, the public sphere is emptied of shared criteria, leaving society at the mercy of power, technology, or emotion. If there are no longer rational reference points to discern what is just, then —Ratzinger warns— power replaces reason: whoever controls the media, institutions, or dominant language determines what "works," what "is acceptable," or even what "may be said." In this context, public debate is no longer grounded in arguments but is reduced to strategies of persuasion, marketing, or political correctness —a dynamic that erodes the very essence of deliberative democracy.[36, 37]

7. The false tolerance of relativism: from indifference to civic enmity

In this way, the relativist thesis —which originally sought to facilitate civil coexistence and protect freedom in pluralistic democratic societies— paradoxically ends up functioning as a silent factor that promotes social fragmentation and democratic decline.

In his study What Can Democracy Be?, Francisco Plaza argues that relativism, by replacing "shared truths" as the foundation

35 Idem.

36 Idem.

37 Benedicto XVI. "Lecture of the Holy Father at the University of Ratisbonne." Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2006, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html

of social coexistence with a mere code of conduct that demands, without exception, the privatization of one's own convictions while simultaneously accepting and respecting all differing convictions as valid, transforms genuine tolerance (enduring what we reject for a greater good) into indifference.[38]

As Plaza explains, if one does not distinguish between upholding a good and tolerating a wrong, tolerance ceases to be a virtue and degenerates into mere indifference: "With indifference, one does not act against the other, but one also does not act with the other or for the other."[39] Far from being neutral, this attitude functions as a form of "passive aggression" that encloses individuals within themselves: citizens "close themselves off from one another and exclude each other from their life horizon," obstructing "that openness which is the preamble to solidarity and fraternal love" —the foundations upon which civic friendship is built.[40]

However, the harm does not stop at indifference. As Plaza warns, it gradually evolves into distancing, then mutual suspicion, and ultimately into open enmity: the other ceases to be perceived as a fellow citizen with whom to cooperate in building the common good, and is instead seen as someone from whom one must guard oneself [41].

In this context, public debate becomes polarized to irreconcilable extremes. Without a shared horizon of meaning, politics are reduced to the mere administration of rules and the

38 Francisco Plaza, "¿Qué puede ser la democracia?", in J. Borges, P. Matheus, y P. Bautista (Edits.), *La renovación espiritual de la democracia: Antiguos fundamentos, nuevos horizontes*, 2025, e.p., p. 4.

39 Idem, p. 5.

40 Idem, p. 6.

41 Idem.

appointment of arbitrators, ultimately splitting societies into hostile factions that have lost the will to live together. In this way, the apparent peace of "relativist tolerance" degenerates into polarization, discord, and social fracture.

8. Relativism in the background of contemporary autocratizing dynamics

As can be observed, these philosophical and political reflections on the impact of relativism on democracy have a clear direct and indirect correlation with some of the factors that empirical literature identifies as causes of the third wave of autocratization.

The argument that relativistic tolerance leads to "open hostility" among citizens—who stop seeing each other as fellow citizens and instead perceive each other as adversaries—finds a notable correspondence with contemporary political science findings on **extreme polarization**. Recent studies document how polarization is no longer limited to ideological disagreements but has transformed into affective animosity toward the "political other."[42]). This phenomenon, described by various authors as "pernicious polarization"[43] or "toxic polarization," occurs when society splits into two identity-based blocs that are morally opposed and mutually dehumanizing, seeing the adversary not as mistaken but as evil or threatening. This form of polarization erodes democratic norms, paralyzes institutions, and is highly predictive of autocratization processes.

42 Shanto Iyengar, "The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States". *Annual Review of Political Science,* 2019, 22, 129-146, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-0

43 Jennifer McCoy, Tahmina Rahman, Murat Somer, "Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities". *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2018, 62(1), 16-42, https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764218759576

Similarly, it can be observed that the diagnosis that moral relativism leads citizens to "close themselves off from one another," thereby obstructing the openness necessary for civic friendship, corresponds closely with the phenomena of **political disengagement and the weakening of social capital**. Studies on political culture[44] show that in societies where shared values erode and convictions are privatized to the point of becoming irrelevant in the public sphere, there is a significant correlation with declining voter participation, reduced civil associationalism, and the fragmentation of networks of interpersonal trust —factors directly linked to the threats facing, and the vulnerability of, the democratic system.

Moreover, it is evident that reducing politics to the mere administration of rules and the appointment of arbitrators —resulting from the loss of shared horizons of meaning caused by relativism— finds a clear parallel in the literature on the **erosion of institutional trust**. Empirical studies[45] show that when institutions no longer embody shared values and are perceived merely as technical or bureaucratic mechanisms, citizens' trust in them erodes profoundly. This erosion not only generates apathy but also creates favorable conditions for the rise of authoritarian

44 Russell J. Dalton, *Democratic challenges, democratic choices: The erosion of political support in advanced industrial democracies*. Oxford University Press, 2004.
Disaffected democracies: What's troubling the trilateral countries?, Susan J. Pharr and Robert D. Putnam editores, Princeton University Press, 2000.
Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community,*Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, New York, 2000.

45 Pippa Norris, Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural backlash: Trump, Brexit, and authoritarian populism*. Cambridge University Press, 2019.
Margaret Levi, Laura Stoker, "Political trust and trustworthiness", *Annual Review of Political Science,* 2000, 3(1), 475–507, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.3.1.475

leaders who promise to restore meaning, identity, and political efficacy.

Similarly, the social fragmentation and the vacuum of "shared truths" created by relativism generate favorable conditions for the **rise of populist leaders** who offer simple certainties and unifying narratives. The literature on populism[46] confirms that these movements thrive precisely in contexts of cultural disorientation, where the loss of common reference frameworks creates a deep nostalgia for the cohesion that has been lost. Populist leaders capitalize on this nostalgia, not to restore rational debate about the common good, but to construct Manichean divisions between a "pure people" and "corrupt elites," presenting themselves as the only ones capable of restoring a sense of unity and truth.

Finally, the weakening of shared normative foundations —fostered by relativism— **facilitates processes of autocratization from within the democratic system**. By denying any objective truth accessible to reason, the will of circumstantial majorities becomes the ultimate legitimate source of legality. Presented as "truly democratic," this logic undermines the very foundations of democracy: without principles that constrain the majority—human rights, the dignity of the person, the rule of law—no institution, law, or minority is truly secure.

Studies on democratic backsliding[47] align with this diagnosis. When basic consensuses on the "rules of the game" and the "unwritten democratic norms" (mutual tolerance and institutio-

46 Cas Mudde, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A very short introduction,* Oxford University Press, 2017.
Pippa Norris, Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural backlash...*

47 Steven Levitsky, Daniel Ziblatt, *How democracies die*, Crown, 2018.
Nancy Bermeo, "On democratic backsliding", *Journal of Democracy,* 27(1),5-19, 2016, https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012

nal self-restraint) erode, elected leaders gradually subvert liberal checks and balances from within the system. They do not abolish constitutions —they reinterpret them to suit their interests; they do not repeal rights— they subordinate them to the "popular will"; they do not storm parliaments —they "co-opt" them, bringing them under the executive's control. In this way, democracies slowly wither away.

Conclusions

This article has demonstrated the significant convergence between the erosive effects of relativism on democracy —analyzed from a philosophical-political perspective— and several factors identified by political science as causes of the current global wave of autocratization.Unlike the more visible drivers of democratic backsliding, relativism operates in a quieter and deeper manner: it erodes the shared normative foundations that make democratic coexistence possible. By denying the existence of truths accessible to reason and reducing values to mere contingent cultural constructs, relativism empties the public sphere of common criteria for discerning the common good. In this way, it transforms genuine tolerance —a virtue that entails enduring what one considers wrong for the sake of a higher good— into moral indifference, which gradually evolves into civic enmity. This underlying dynamic is not merely another factor in democratic decline; it constitutes its cultural breeding ground, the condition that allows other autocratizing forces to intensify.

The importance of identifying these convergences lies in the fact that it opens the possibility of articulating a deeper political response to the current global process of autocratization. Predominant approaches tend to focus on combating the symptoms —through institutional reforms, measures against disinformation, or depolarization strategies— all of which are

necessary but insufficient. What remains unaddressed is the anthropological and cultural root of the problem: relativism, which, at its core, is the true illness.

If the public sphere does not recover the idea that there are truths about human nature —dignity, responsible freedom, the common good, civic friendship— accessible to reason and valid for all, it will be impossible to reconstruct genuine tolerance within pluralistic democracies to sustain civilized disagreement, build rational consensus around the common good, or restore mutual trust and the willingness to live together.

Elías Pino Iturrieta: On July 28th "we delivered a resounding defeat to Maduro's movement, paving the way for hope"

Democratization

The professor and member of the National Academy of History affirms that "no episode from Venezuela's past can be compared with what we are experiencing today." Rather than seeking formulas applied in earlier times, the intellectual recommends "building on what we have devised through this exercise of resistance" until change is achieved.

–To begin with, I would like your assessment now that a year has passed since the presidential elections of July 28, 2024.

On July 28, the people made a forceful and undeniable decision: the end of Maduro's regime and the restoration of a democratic process long absent in Venezuela. The voters did not call for a transition, but for the disappearance of the Chavista administration and everything it has represented for society. It was a clear, definitive expression, backed by millions of voters who crushed the few supporters of continuity

I am not sure that those same voters now feel they should keep their heads down, waiting for new opportunities. I think they are still on the lookout for a new chance, but without the emphasis of the past, without the clarity they had on the eve of the vote. Since the regime reacted in terrible ways to cling to power, it has provoked a generalized and understandable caution among a society that rejects it, but that must preserve both the projects for change and life itself in the face of the danger of a disappearance that could be long and painful.

Nothing like this had ever happened before in Venezuelan politics, and hence the need to think about paths forward that are arduous, but that must also be as unprecedented as the situation democracy is undergoing.

–Perhaps one of the hardest things about this moment is this feeling of emptiness, of uncertainty. The electoral path was taken to achieve change, and it did not succeed. Now there is a call not to vote in order to keep alive the claim regarding the July 28 results. The page is not turned, but time does go on. How can a new roadmap be designed in this context?

The second issue is a consequence of the first, as you say, but it is only what has been proposed as a nearby possibility, as an outlet in the face of urgency, but perhaps only as a kind of automatic reaction.

There is a shift suggested from action to passivity, or from dynamism to lack of movement, which is not without meaning when one considers how inaction itself can be an eloquent response to the brutality of those in power, or as a way of surviving while awaiting better times without exhausting one's strength.

However, idleness leads, or can lead, to exhaustion. Inaction is the puzzle that neither the interviewer nor the interviewee can solve, but rather those who are higher up and more committed, more obligated, like María Corina Machado and the members of her vanguard. But, as things stand today, the page is not turned; unfortunately, the same sheet keeps being read without anything of significance being added to the text.

I know it is very difficult, with the henchmen breathing down your neck and in the midst of pervasive terror, to set about writing wonders, but the writing cannot be paralyzed.

–In moments like this, more than a few voices suggest "reviewing" or "learning" from history to confront the challenges of the present. What episode from Venezuela's past might be useful to analyze in order to approach this reality?

No episode from Venezuela's past can be compared with what we are experiencing today. None. Nothing even remotely similar. That is why the past cannot serve as a ready-made guide for us, and why the answers we seek and need are so difficult to find in the midst of unprecedented uncertainty.

With the political parties that functioned up until the rise of the lieutenant colonel now languishing, with the ideas that nourished them consigned to the cemetery, with most of the newer parties having nothing to offer, with most of the opposition leaders marginalized from society or bought off cheaply by the autocracy, the result is a desolate landscape that the old chronicles never recorded.

But it is not only a painful matter; it is also a promising one, because it shows how, in the midst of such barrenness, we

lifted our heads as a society and delivered a resounding defeat to Maduro's movement, paving the way for hope as never before. From there must come an outcome as auspicious as the result of July 28.

–Chavismo has already been in power for a quarter of a century, and its civilian-military leadership constantly reiterates that theirs is a historical project, one that comes to complete the independence struggle initiated by the heroes of the homeland, of whom they claim to be direct heirs. Twenty-five years later, how can the Chavista project be defined within the framework of our history?

Chavismo is historical in only one regard: a single, momentous fact that most of our analysts and observers have failed to grasp —the total annihilation of the Republic founded by Venezuelans in 1830.

This is of the utmost importance: the burial of Venezuelan life as it was conceived from its origins, the death of public institutions and the codes of conduct built over time, the overwhelming of legality rooted in liberal principles, the imposition of a new everyday life, and even the reshaping of collective memories regarding what is public and what is private. That is what is historical —or rather, anti-historical— about Chavismo.

But it is also the failure of Venezuelan politicians and intellectuals, with honorable and rare exceptions, who have not even perceived the slightest trace of the destructive monster. Chavismo is the negation of the Republic built by our ancestors and by ourselves, of a valued republicanism turned to rags. That is Chavismo.

–Maduro proposes —without offering further details to date— a reform of the Constitution to —he says— strengthen communal power. Will this be the birth of the Sixth Republic?

There is no Sixth Republic, because there was no Fourth or Third. There has only been one Republic, originating with the Colombian secession, which the Chavistas have carried to the grave. The historical significance of María Corina Machado's leadership and that of her team lies in their proposal to return from the liberal path, or the liberalism that has been the essence of national deliberation since Venezuela's founding. If a convincing explanation of that leadership was needed, I offer this one to you.

A new Constitution matters little, insofar as it does not represent anything truly novel in the intentional process of destroying republicanism that has been underway since the rise of the lieutenant colonel. One more step toward the abyss —but we were not surprised by the next step. It was predictable, though we neither acknowledged it nor joined in its chorus.

–When people talk about a transition for Venezuela, academics and commentators cite the cases of Chile, Poland, Spain, and South Africa, among others. Why is it that the Venezuelan case of January 23, 1958, is so rarely mentioned? Could it be because such a rupture is considered impossible?

January 23, 1958, took place after the burial of the deceased general. The "deceased" of our present day, however, is alive and kicking —far from the grave. The enemies of the deceased back then were not only young and vigorous, but also enjoyed overwhelming popular support. Today, we do not even have a program for funerary rites. The current reality is so unprecedented that it cannot rely on references to past political examples; instead,

it depends on following what we have invented in an exercise of resistance unlike anything in our history, yet for that very reason, full of enigmas and unpredictable.

> –On one hand, it is said that Venezuela will not become another Cuba because it carries a democratic experience that works in its favor. But on the other hand, it is noted that those forty years of civil democracy were just a parenthesis in a history marked by militarism and authoritarianism. Who has more deeply embedded elements in the Venezuelan DNA to win this struggle: the brief democratic memory or the long authoritarian tradition?

Regarding the DNA, I can only tell you that it exists and can be verified in what we have done against the lieutenant colonel and his successor. First, we learned to survive, and then we have gradually cornered him, forcing him to commit an unprecedented electoral fraud and to abandon any restraint in the realms of torture, humiliation, forced disappearances, and the violation of human rights. And we accomplished this on the fly, without classroom instructors or ready-made models. Perhaps only with the inspiration of María Corina Machado. Without headaches or state-of-the-art tricks, any city laboratory could confirm the existence of that DNA. But we can guarantee its existence up to today —because tomorrow will be another day.

Argentina must mature to overcome the Peronist populist discourse

Micaela Hierro Dori

Polarization between Peronists and anti-Peronists has long shaped Argentine political debate, creating a persistent ideological and cultural stalemate that has persisted for decades. Since the emergence of Colonel Juan Domingo Perón during the 1943 military coup and his participation in a de facto government as Secretary of Labor, Perón's movement gained popularity and culminated in his election to the Presidency in 1946. Peronism has been one of the most influential and enduring movements in the nation's history. The polarization and division within the political class between Peronists and anti-Peronists is evident in the use of dehumanizing terms for opponents. The term "gorilla," used by Peronists to refer to anti-Peronists, reflects a fascist-style dehumanization, reducing the opponent to an animal figure and denying their dignity.

At the same time, certain anti-Peronist sectors have demonized Peronism as a democratic anomaly, without taking into account the historical reasons behind its popularity. They accuse members of the working-class population who have lost the work ethic, labeling them "planeros" living off social welfare, unwilling to seek employment, and pressuring the government for benefits it cannot sustain —especially during times of fiscal crisis. This

unfairly generalizes the misdeeds of a few and stigmatizes the entire movement.

Neither one nor the other. First, let us analyze the reasons and distortions in the discourse from both sides:

The manipulation of Peronist discourse

While Perón spoke of a "third position," criticizing both capitalism and communism, this was far from a moderate centrist stance; it was a mix of terms and concepts designed to incorporate different sectors of society into his electorate. Perón skillfully appropriated terms and structures from both Marxist and Soviet state-planning language as well as fascist ideologies, and reinterpreted them under a nationalist logic. Both Marxism and Nazism or fascism share a totalitarian vision of the state over the individual. Perón therefore, replaced the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat or the corporatist fascist ideal —where social interests are harmoniously integrated under state control— with the concept of an "organized community" and substituted class revolution with a popular national mobilization. He used Soviet-style terminology, such as five-year plans, to implement a vision of a centralized, statist economy. This mixture was further complicated when he incorporated elements of the Social Doctrine of the Church (inspired by encyclicals such as *Rerum Novarum* (1891) by Leo XIII and *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) by Pius XI) through the terms social justice and the defense of worker dignity —concepts that any person of goodwill would aspire to see realized in their country. The problem is that Perón applied it within a framework similar to that of a totalizing fascist state, where the state is the main organizer of economic and social life, granting benefits from above. The Peronist reinterpretation produced a deficient political anthropology, in which the individual is conceived not as an autonomous and responsible

subject, but as a passive recipient of rights granted by those in power. Material equality is prioritized over free and collaborative participation. This departs from the classical notion of justice as giving "to each what is due," substituting merit and responsibility with subjective need, managed by the state. The idea of social justice is thus subordinated to an emotional narrative that replaces critical analysis. Perón also redefined social justice as the provision of what each person needs, rather than what is their due. This formulation is incompatible with the Church's social teaching, which requires freedom, responsibility, and subsidiarity as conditions for authentic justice.

Perón's ability to absorb contradictory discourses and adapt to changing contexts has created profound doctrinal confusion in Argentine political culture. This ambiguity affects not only the political sphere but has also caused real anthropological damage, altering the way Argentine citizens perceive work, justice, social participation, and the role of the state. Above all, the damage lies in the conception and vision of the state's role. The proclamation of social justice —the main banner of Peronism— has established an ideal of a paternalistic state, one from which everything is expected, a "permanent provider father," ultimately producing passive, dependent, and immature citizens. Citizens demand the guarantee of these rights while forgetting that they must also assume responsibilities, forge character, and contribute to the common good so that the social, economic, and political conditions of the country allow the entire society to develop and live in civic harmony.

Peronism has hollowed out another key concept, "social dialogue," using it to justify clientelism, excessive public spending, or authoritarian and extortionary union practices toward businesses or the oligarchy —a term more commonly used in Marxist discourse. This semantic emptying generates

widespread rejection, even among moderate sectors, of any proposal that includes these expressions. The consequence is structural: it prevents the construction of a civic culture based on legality, merit, and genuine solidarity.

The virtue of work has been replaced by a logic of dependency. Solidarity is reduced to party loyalty, and equity becomes the arbitrary distribution of benefits. The figure of the poor is idealized as a victim by definition and is opposed to a supposed oligarchic oppressor, following a binary logic that is incompatible with the Social Doctrine of the Church (SDC).

Perón asserts that the organized community —the "we"— is the supreme order,[1] thus denying the ontological value of the human person as a free and responsible subject. This vision contradicts the Christian personalism of Maritain and Mounier, for whom the state must serve the person, not the other way around.

In a 21st-century version of Peronism, Juan Grabois, in his proposal focused on Land, Roof, and Work (3T), adopts a distributive logic with a strong state imprint. Although he presents himself as a defender of the Social Doctrine of the Church (SDC), his policies have been criticized for violating the principle of subsidiarity, one of the pillars of that doctrine. This principle holds that the state should intervene only when the lower levels of society are unable to resolve a problem on their own. In his book Argentina Humana[2] Grabois proposes a statist and planning-oriented approach, including the idea of a new five-year plan inspired by the Soviet model. He has even promoted occupations of private lands, in a logic closer to communist agrarian reform

1 Juan Domingo Perón, *La comunidad organizada,* Ediciones del Congreso Justicialista, Buenos Aires, 1949.

2 Juan Grabois, *Argentina Humana: Teoría y práctica para la justicia social en el siglo XXI. Un proyecto contracultural,* Sudamericana, Buenos Aires, 2024.

than to the Christian protection of property rights. His vision advocates a redistribution of resources that can foster dependency and clientelism if not accompanied by genuine mechanisms for progressive autonomy.

Peronism has co-opted unions, social movements, and media outlets, creating a cultural hegemony that marginalizes any alternative discourse. From a Christian perspective, this constitutes a betrayal of the Social Doctrine of the Church (SDC), which prioritizes freedom, participation, and dignity above all. Professor and Catholic Action member Carlos Sacheri warned, in general terms, against the political instrumentalization of SDC language and specifically criticized Peronism for its populist and clientelist use of it. Sacheri became a martyr defending truth and Christian values; despite receiving multiple threats, he chose not to remain silent out of fear and was assassinated by the guerrilla organization ERP on December 22, 1974.

In these eighty years of the Peronist movement, despite the confrontation between Perón and the Church in 1955, the use of Christian values in political discourse persisted. Despite the secularist measures of 1954–1955 —such as the elimination of religious education in public schools, the legalization of civil divorce, the proposal to remove religious holidays, the expulsion of priests and bishops considered opponents, and the prohibition of religious processions (such as *Corpus Christi)*— which were experienced as an ideological attack on Catholicism, Peronism continued to appeal to religious language. After the failed bombing of Plaza de Mayo by certain military sectors, groups identified with Peronism —whether unions or other state-mobilized actors— attacked and burned several historic 18th-century churches, including San Ignacio de Loyola, Convento Santo Domingo, Iglesia de San Francisco, La Piedad, Santa Catalina, and El Salvador, as well as Catholic buildings such as the metropolitan curia,

destroying images, relics, and historical archives. The Federal Police, under Peronist control, did not act to stop the attacks, and Perón himself never explicitly condemned the events, attributing them instead to the "indignant people." There was a separation between Peronists and the more conservative sectors of the Church. However, starting in the 1970s, groups such as the Theology of the People and the Movement of Priests for the Third World —later reprimanded by Pope John Paul II for confusing Marxist concepts with those of the Social Doctrine of the Church— reestablished links between Catholicism and Peronism.

Despite these ups and downs, many Peronist activists who are believers and practicing Catholics remain in the movement even after the conflict and all these events, due to its manipulative discourse using the principles of the Social Doctrine of the Church (SDC) and the absence of another strong political space that exposes this instrumentalization and truly promotes those values.

On the other hand, the anti-Peronist discourse has often failed to offer an emotionally compelling alternative. While Peronism speaks in terms of belonging and collective epic, its opponents tend to appeal to technocratic or cold languages. This reinforces the affective identity of Peronist voters, who feel attacked by a distant elite: liberals, conservatives, republicans—anyone who points out Peronism's faults or seeks to expose its distortion of universal truths and values is perceived as misleading and manipulating the people.

Moreover, anti-populist sectors often reduce the Peronist phenomenon to corruption or clientelism, without understanding its symbolic and cultural dimension. This attitude prevents the construction of an alternative narrative that combines social justice with republicanism, and community with freedom.

Overcoming Peronist populism requires more than a technical critique: it demands a profound cultural renewal. It is necessary to rebuild political language on clear ethical foundations, recover the authentic meaning of social justice, and revalue work, responsibility, and the common good. A new emotionally compelling narrative is also needed —one that can engage the popular sectors without falling into populism..

Benedict XVI warns in Caritas in Veritate that state aid must not replace personal responsibility. The paternalistic logic of Peronism ignores this teaching, turning citizens into clients and the state into a dispenser of favors. It is through the empowerment of citizens —not through manipulation by populists, whether left or right— that these deeply rooted obstacles in Argentine political culture can be overcome.

Argentines must be freed from this polarization and reclaim the fundamental values that Peronism has distorted —values that are universal and should not be the exclusive discourse of any political party:

- The person as a subject of rights and duties, enjoying freedom as a pillar of human dignity —not subordinated to an organized community, a movement, or a leader, absorbed into a whole called the "people."

- Social justice understood as the balance between responsibility and the common good, not as the redistribution of political power.

- The organization of society in a participatory, democratic, and horizontal manner, not vertical under a leader or exclusive to a movement.

It is essential that all political forces in the country, regardless of their ideologies or sectoral interests, be able to reach a basic consensus around certain fundamental principles that guarantee human dignity. These principles —such as respect for individual rights, equality before the law, freedom of conscience, and social justice— constitute the foundation upon which any democratic and pluralistic society is built. Only when this minimum agreement on the centrality of the human person and the principle of subsidiarity has been consolidated will it be possible to open the legitimate and necessary debate on the focus and orientation of public policies. Without this common framework, political discussion risks becoming purely tactical or partisan, drifting away from the common good and fostering social fragmentation.

For this reason, it is imperative to restore the Christian anthropology of the subject: a vision of the human being as a free, creative, and dignified person, prior to and above the state. Only in this way can a democracy be recovered in which the citizen is once again a protagonist, not merely a client.

Leo XIV and the Future of Civilization: Evil Shall Not Prevail

Juan Miguel Matheus

White Smoke

On May 8, 2025, St. Peter's Square filled with people. Hundreds of thousands of faithful fixed their gaze on the chimney of the Sistine Chapel. Around the world, millions waited in suspense for the name of Pope Francis's successor. Who would become the new Vicar of Christ on earth? Then came the unmistakable signal: white smoke rose into the sky, and the crowd erupted in jubilation. Minutes later, the Cardinal Protodeacon stepped out onto the basilica balcony to deliver the traditional announcement.

Annuntio vobis gaudium magnum: habemus Papam!
Eminentissimum ac Reverendissimum
Dominum, Robertum Franciscum,
Cardinalem Sanctae Romanae Eclessiae Prevost,
qui sibi nomen imposuit Leonem Decimum Quartum.

At that moment, the newly elected Pope steps forward calmly, visibly moved. His predecessor, Francis, had recognized him as a pastor deeply devoted to God's people and raised him to the rank of Cardinal. Without saying much, the scene is full of symbolism. He had been Prior of the Augustinians (a sign of the longing for peace and concord that civilization yearns for); he takes the name

Leo XIV (reflecting a strong commitment to the Social Doctrine of the Church and a profound awareness of the social question); he served as Prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops (a testament to his deep knowledge of the particular Churches); and, finally, he was born in the United States of America, of mixed heritage — European roots and Peruvian by adoption— (a voice uniquely positioned to denounce the global liberal disorder, rooted above all in the institutional crisis and fragility of that democratic power).

We must still wait to see how his pontificate will develop. Time must take its course. Yet his very presence seems to mark the beginning of a new chapter for the Church, one defined by the urgent need to renew spiritually the face of the earth.

His pastoral program and of spiritual renewal

The election of Leo XIV restores to the world a forgotten language: hope grounded in truth. Amid global disarray, cultural relativism, and authoritarianism —whether disguised as democratic consensus or not— the new Pope steps forth as a prophetic shepherd. His words do not flatter. His presence does not divide. His style does not trivialize. He does not pose. With papal dignitas and auctoritas, Leo XIV reminds the world that the Church's mission is to proclaim the truth that saves and, from it, to propose justice as the foundation of peace.

This pontificate does not arise in a vacuum. It inherits a vast doctrinal architecture: the one built by Leo XIII with Rerum Novarum in 1891 when he proclaimed that social justice is inseparable from the Gospel —carried forward by every Pope since—, and the one reaffirmed by John Paul II with Centesimus Annus in 1991, when he condemned the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century and warned that freedom without truth destroys man (while also declaring that the Social Doctrine of

the Church is Theology, specifically Moral Theology). Leo XIV embraces that legacy and reshapes it for a contemporary world where the so-called liberal order —consolidated after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet empire— has revealed itself to be less an order than a chaos marked by moral voids. That is why his program is peace in the Augustinian sense: "the tranquility of order.".

Social Doctrine as a defense of truth against totalitarianism

Since Leo XIII, the Social Doctrine of the Church has acted as an antidote to all forms of political or economic absolutism. Against collectivism, which denies individual autonomy, and liberalism, which reduces the person to mere self-interest, the Church has affirmed the transcendent dignity of the human person as the center of society.

John Paul II, who was witness and victim of Nazi and communist totalitarianisms, understood that evil does not always wear a violent mask: it sometimes disguises itself as "efficiency" or "progress." In *Centesimus Annus*, he warned that regimes denying the truth about man are inevitably doomed to inhumanity. His teaching framed freedom as a path toward truth, not as an excuse for the whims of any human will, much less for the exercise of power.

Leo XIV reaffirms this line of thought with renewed urgency. He warns that emerging forms of cultural totalitarianism —such as subordinating education to state ideologies, suppressing religious freedom, attempting to distort family and marriage, and threatening the right to life— pose real dangers to democracy. In his first Urbi et Orbi message, he declared: "the world is hungry for order, not imposition; for truth, not manipulation; for peace, not complicit silence." While he did not quote Saint Augustine

directly, he evoked his ideas, portraying the human being as a pilgrim on the way to a true homeland and emphasizing —once again— that peace arises from a just order..

Peace as a moral horizon: just order and political hope

In a world torn by conflict, Leo XIV positions peace as the central focus of his pontificate. But not as a sentimental utopia —rather, as a realistic horizon grounded in justice. There is no peace where lies prevail. No peace where human nature is denied. There is no peace where conscience is replaced by fear.

By reviving the Augustinian notion of peace as *tranquillitas ordinis*, associated with the idea of concord, Leo XIV restores politics to its moral dimension: order is not domination. It is the collective pursuit of truth. He emphasizes that diplomatic pacts or systems of Public International Law, which may be exhausted or ineffective, are not enough. What is needed is a spiritual renewal of power. Only through truth, freedom, love, and justice —as San John XXIII taught— can lasting peace, stable political communities, and a truly human civilization emerge.

For this reason, the world has responded with attention. Leaders from various religions and ideological currents recognize that, in a time of noise and instability, Leo XIV radiates serenity rooted in peace. His presence —sober, firm, and approachable— signals the possibility of a new era of dialogue without ambiguity and of peace without moral compromise.

Youth and public life: educating to serve in truth.

One of Pope Leo XIV's key priorities seems to be the education of young people —both in faith and in their responsibility to engage with politics and society. He sees that the collapse of the

global liberal order stems from failed structures, from generations adrift, lacking a moral compass, untrained in virtue, and without guiding mentors. He perceives —and seeks to convey— that the disorder of the liberal world is fundamentally an anthropological crisis, a crisis of the soul. It is therefore a crisis of meaning regarding humanity's purpose and the pursuit of the good throughout history.

From his time in Chiclayo, where he worked with marginalized youth, the former missionary and later Bishop Prevost came to see that true revolution lies in education. That is why he often references the Doctrinal Note on the Participation of Catholics in Public Life, issued in 2002 by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which affirms that political engagement is a duty of Christian charity and that a well-formed conscience is the only defense against the corruption of power. To this dimension, he has aimed to recover the example of Saint Thomas More, proclaimed by John Paul II as patron of rulers and politicians. Leo XIV describes More as "the archetype of the Christian politician: cultured, free, courageous, willing to lose everything rather than lose his soul." He urges Catholic youth not to shy away: "Do not fear public life. Engage with truth —not to impose, but to serve."

Against cultural totalitarianism and the dictatorship of relativism: a Church that teaches and resists with hope.

Leo XIV makes it clear that the Church is not neutral when the dignity of the human person is at stake. It is not like Pilate. It does not wash its hands. It is not indifferent to the manipulation of childhood, the dissolution of the family, the commodification of life, or —as he has repeatedly emphasized— the dehumanizing risks posed by artificial intelligence without ethical limits. His

pontificate begins with a gesture of resistance: declaring that the Church will educate, even if forbidden; that it will form consciences, even if power or paid ideological agendas seek to prevent it; that it will speak the truth, even at the cost of being persecuted.

This resistance is not ideological. It is spiritual. Leo XIV does not call for sterile confrontation. He summons the courageous affirmation of the Gospel. Just as Leo XIII did in the face of the excesses of industrial capitalism and the threats of Marxism, and John Paul II did against the tyranny of uniform thought, Leo XIV today confronts the totalitarianism of indifference and the authoritarianism of political correctness —against the dictatorship of relativism that Benedict XVI so bravely opposed.

Leo XIV: a pontiff to restore order in truth.

The pontificate of Leo XIV is a sign of our times. Amid global disorder, he proposes a vision of order. Amid cynicism, he proclaims simplicity. Amid lies, he announces the truth.

Like Leo XIII, he knows that justice is impossible without a social doctrine grounded in natural law. Like John Paul II, he knows that there is no freedom without truth, nor politics without virtue. And like Saint Augustine —whom he did not quote literally, but whose spirituality permeated his first address— Leo XIV understands that peace is not merely the absence of conflict: it is the fruit of a reconciled community in pursuit of truth. In doing so, he has traced both a spiritual path and a framework for ecclesial governance in the world: to build the universal common good.

His pontificate is announced as a time of moral reconstruction, political education, doctrinal resistance, and true peace. Leo XIV

projects to the world a realistic and profound hope: that a just civilizational order is still possible and that the Church has the duty to sow it in the hearts of individuals and nations. A pontificate of greater emphasis on the Social Doctrine of the Church and on a deep conviction in trust in the human being is approaching. As he stated in his first address: evil shall not prevail...

Nicaragua Resists: Daniel Ortega Gained Control but Lost Power

Lesther Alemán

"Thus the people leapt into the streets, jubilant, waving flags,
believing that a single man embodied all their harm,
dancing in the sun
while in the dark crevice of one or two hearts
the new tyranny silently nested."
Pablo Antonio Cuadra

Forty-six years after the Sandinistas came to power, in what some call "the triumph of the revolution," it is worth pausing to consider what now reads like a clear prophecy by Nicaraguan poet Pablo Antonio Cuadra, in this passage from "In the Heat of August...". A poem that could describe how an armed uprising brought about the fall of a dynasty —the Somozas— while, in the shadows, a new tyranny was taking shape —cloaked in illusion, myth, and promises of prosperity for the long-impoverished and marginalized.

As Latin America faces a growing wave of authoritarian regressions, Nicaragua emerges as one of the most alarming and, at the same time, paradigmatic cases. In its recent history, since 2018, the dictatorship of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo has cemented the collapse of democracy, establishing a de facto

totalitarian state through killings, deprivations, brutal repression, forced exile, and the criminalization of all dissent, as the daily weapons of power[1].

In the face of this apparatus of oppression, an alternative emerged of peaceful resistance, diverse and committed to restoring democratic order and the rule of law. Despite the complicit silence of some international actors and the diplomatic normalization of an unpunished dictatorship, Nicaraguan society resists —both inside and outside the country— paying an extraordinarily high human cost to regain its freedom.

This article aims to examine the role of this resistance against the Ortega-Murillo regime and to explore its implications for democracy in Latin America. Nicaragua is not an isolated anomaly, but rather a troubling mirror of the challenges faced by democratic systems across the continent: the hollowing out of institutions —stripped of checks and balances and captured by state powers—, the use of the armed forces as a tool of political control, the annihilation of real oppositions, and the colonization of collective memory.

The establishment of totalitarianism in the heart of Central America

The defeat Daniel Ortega suffered in 1990 left him in a parliamentary minority and drove him to co-opt labor unions —with roots in Sandinismo— in order to "govern from below" and create instability for his successors. One of the most common vices in local politics is not knowing how and when to step down

1 Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. *Graves violaciones a los derechos humanos en el marco de la crisis sociopolítica en Nicaragua*. OEA/Ser.L/V/II, doc. 86. Washington, D.C.: OEA, 2018.

from office. Ortega capitalized on his time in opposition by strengthening the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) until it became the second political force amid the imminent divisions within Nicaraguan liberalism, which in turn enabled the secret 2000 pact between Ortega and Arnoldo Alemán.

This pact —between the FSLN and the Constitutional Liberal Party (PLC)— allowed both parties to divide up control of state institutions as if it were a banquet: 50/50 for each in the judiciary, the electoral system, and continued presence in Parliament. The threshold to win an election outright in the first round was reduced to 35%, and the runoff election was eliminated. These conditions were custom-designed to smooth Ortega's path back to power.

The current dictatorship is built on a foundation of impunity, corruption, and a political class without scruples. From its inception, the regime sought to dominate not only state institutions but also private life, the collective conscience, and the nation's historical narrative.[2] This authoritarian drift relied on weak institutions, built not on democratic or republican principles, but on an ideology transformed into a founding myth: Sandinismo.

In 2007, Daniel Ortega returned to power. No longer wearing a military uniform, he appeared in the public square in a white shirt and called on the police and army to return to Sandinista principles. The "second phase of the revolution" was underway. A strategy of power accumulation and centralization then began, dismantling institutional checks and balances: the Judiciary was captured through loyal magistrates, the Supreme Electoral Council became an office of fraud, and the National Assembly turned

2 United Nations Human Rights Council. *Informe del Grupo de Expertos sobre Nicaragua: La consolidación de un Estado totalitario.* A/HRC/55/49. Ginebra: ONU, 2024.

into an instrument to legalize arbitrariness. The separation of powers was completely eliminated.[3]

The constitutional rupture occurred in 2009, when magistrate Rafael Solís —president of the Constitutional Chamber of the Judiciary and the wedding godfather of Ortega and Murillo—ruled that Article 147 of the Constitution, which barred presidential reelection, was no longer enforceable. The Organization of American States (OAS) rstayed silent, even while monitoring the elections, failing to acknowledge the obvious irregularities.

At the same time, Ortega presented himself as "a new man," pragmatic, seeking to make a pact with one of the country's real powers: the capitalist elite. He established a tacit agreement with the business elites, especially COSEP, offering political stability and legal security in exchange for non-confrontation. The pact functioned as the backbone of the model: access to contracts, protection from protests, and the ability to influence economic policies, in exchange for quiet backing of authoritarian rule. Democracy was sacrificed in exchange for the illusion of economic growth.

Tropical sultanate: an export model of coercion

The most radical shift occurred after the civic uprising of April 2018, when repression left more than 350 people dead, more than 2,000 political prisoners, in a 'revolving door' cycle of arrests and releases, and nearly 900,000 exiles: the largest exodus in the country's recent history.[4] Repression became institutionalized:

3 Organization of American States. *Informe sobre Nicaragua y resolución de condena al régimen Ortega-Murillo.* AG/RES. 2948. Washington, D.C.: OEA, 2021

4 ACNUR. *Situación de desplazamiento de personas nicaragüenses. América Central,* ACNUR, 2023.

journalists, students, priests, business leaders, and opposition figures were persecuted, imprisoned, killed, or banished. More than 5,000 NGOs have been shut down, and political parties not aligned with the regime have been outlawed.

Ortega does not rule alone. Rosario Murillo, his wife, has been central to the construction of this "tropical sultanate." Under her command, propaganda has imposed a culture of obedience based on the cult of personality, fear, and symbolic manipulation: a kind of political catechism designed to rewrite history. An even more perverse echo of Nicolae and Elena Ceauşescu, the Romanian dictators.

In 2024, Ortega formalized the two-headed dictatorship: a constitutional reform allowed Rosario Murillo to be named "co-president," securing a dynastic line of succession. Although there is no provision for how their children might inherit power, it is clear that the model aspires to perpetuate itself, since the position was crafted as a discretionary role for vice presidents —without granting them access to the bloodstained throne.

The strength of the regime today rests on terror, enforced through the State's absolute control and the deployment of armed forces and police as instruments of repression. International organizations have confirmed that the state apparatus —including the National Police and the Army— has been instrumentalized to carry out a repressive plan with the knowledge of the political leadership: a combination of vertical power and ideological fanaticism [5].

Divergentes, "Los 328 nicaragüenses desnacionalizados: quiénes son y qué representan", *Divergentes*, February 10, 2023. https://www.divergentes.com.

5 "Informe del Grupo de Expertos en Derechos Humanos sobre Nicaragua: Violaciones generalizadas y sistemáticas de los derechos humanos

In foreign policy, the dictatorship has turned Nicaragua into an authoritarian enclave serving powers such as Russia, China, Iran, Cuba, and Venezuela. Ortega is no longer just a national dictator: he is an accomplice to espionage networks, money laundering for his allies, an exporter of irregular migration, and a protector of fugitives from international justice.

April: the birth of new political practices.

In the year 2018, a civic awakening was made possible that overcame the barrier of apathy and channeled demands for representation that the traditional political class had failed to address. The existing parties, far from capitalizing on this social energy, invested their political capital, human resources, and finances in discouraging citizen participation in public affairs. It was the drive and courage of the youth that allowed sectors historically excluded from decision-making spaces to raise their voices.

The first phase of the process was defined by 'self-organized' forms of peaceful protest. This brought with it important advantages: greater participation, diversity, spontaneity, and a reduction of collective fear. However, there were also disadvantages: dispersion, lack of information, vulnerability, and greater strategic demands. Despite this, a new political class emerged with a multisectoral face, managing to bring together —through common ground— sectors historically divided: the private sector and trade unionists, progressive groups and conservative organizations, for example.

desde abril de 2018", United Nations Human Rights Council, March 2023. A/HRC/52/63..

This new opposition articulated its interests around the recovery of the rule of law, individual and collective freedoms, democratic institutionalization, and the pursuit of justice for the victims. Organization became the second phase, complex by nature, which fragmented what had once looked like a single, united blue-and-white front. The thirst for democracy generated a proliferation of organizations, movements, and platforms. Resistance in Nicaragua has not been homogeneous or linear, but it has been profoundly courageous, plural, and ethical. Confronting the Ortega-Murillo dictatorship through nonviolence, in the midst of systematic repression, has been —and continues to be— an act of collective heroism.

The civic insurrection of April marked a breaking point in recent political history. What began as a student protest against neoliberal reforms to the social security system quickly transformed into a national uprising against corruption, repression, and the lack of freedoms. Through various forms of protest, the population found a new voice demanding the resignation of the regime.

Part of this leadership bet on a peaceful and orderly way out of the crisis through elections in 2021. Although conditions were unfavorable, they prepared to hold primaries. And, as the saying goes, 'Ortega killed the cat at the doorstep,' meaning something was crushed before it could even begin. The discontent was so widespread that the dictatorship's strategies of control only strengthened the citizens' drive to go out and vote. The dictatorship knew this. That is why it annihilated the competition by imprisoning the pre-candidates and dissidents who threatened the status quo, later forcing them into exile.

Since then, the resistance has been reconfigured in multiple forms. In exile, there are platforms for raising international

awareness and denunciation and efforts to reorganize opposition movements, with members now scattered across the globe. Social media has played a key role in bridging these two realities. But is there opposition inside the country? The answer is immediate: yes.

Despite absolute control, gestures of everyday rebellion persist: an anonymous piece of graffiti, a whispered slogan, civic disobedience in the face of the obligation to attend regime-sponsored activities, tuning in to independent media from exile, and the organization of clandestine networks —one by one.

Each of these acts represents a denial of absolute power and an an unyielding affirmation of the right to live in freedom.

The Catholic Church has played a prophetic and human role that has made it the most trusted institution in the country, despite systematic persecution against the clergy and other church bodies. For its part, the independent press —even from exile— continues to inform the public, despite media confiscations and newsroom closures.[6] The dictatorship has shut down more than 5,000 non-governmental organizations and stripped more than 300 people of their nationality, but it has not succeeded in erasing critical thought or breaking the collective will for change.[7]

6 Reporteros Sin Fronteras. *Clasificación Mundial de la Libertad de Prensa 2024*. París: RSF, 2024.

7 Human Rights Watch. *World Report 2024: Nicaragua*. Nueva York: HRW, 2024.
La Prensa. "Más de 600,000 nicaragüenses han salido del país desde 2018." *La Prensa*, 2 de diciembre de 2023.

Regional apathy toward dictatorships

The Nicaraguan case cannot be analyzed in isolation. The consolidation of the Ortega-Murillo regime represents a large-scale authoritarian setback that calls into question not only the validity of human rights in Central America, but also the very viability of the democratic model in Latin America. What is happening in Nicaragua is, at the same time, a warning and a symptom: democracy in the region is not guaranteed. Its erosion can be rapid, profound, and, above all, silent if decisive action is not taken.

Nicaragua has become an enclave of international authoritarianism in the Western Hemisphere. The regime has woven strategic alliances with powers such as Russia, China, and Iran, which see Central America as a geopolitically valuable space to challenge Western influence and project power in the region. Through these ties, the regime obtains political, technological, military, and financial support, thereby reinforcing its mechanisms of internal repression. In addition, its ideological and operational closeness with regimes such as those of Cuba and Venezuela has served as a model for consolidating a system of control based on surveillance, persecution, the criminalization of adversaries, and clientelism.[8]

However, the danger does not lie solely in external alignment. Daniel Ortega has paid no significant international political cost, despite the fact that the 2021 elections were not recognized by most of the democratic world. We are facing an asymptomatic and indifferent region, where Ortega sends a clear message to other authoritarian leaders —those with autocratic temptations or already on the path to consolidating a dictatorship: one can

8 BBC Mundo. "Nicaragua: acuerdos con Rusia y China", January 2023.

destroy a republic, imprison the entire opposition, rewrite the Constitution, eliminate political parties, shut down universities, exile thousands of citizens, and still enjoy diplomatic recognition and economic benefits.[9]

Dictatorships do not speak the language of reason, but of coercion. Acting half-heartedly not only prolongs the crisis of the people, but also becomes a veiled form of complicity. The invocation of the Inter-American Democratic Charter —which obliges States to break relations with governments that alter the constitutional order— has fallen into disuse. Paradoxically, it is authoritarian regimes themselves that end up conditioning its application. Many Latin American governments choose silence to avoid "picking a fight," while the paralysis of organizations such as the OAS and the United Nations actively contributes to the normalization of dictatorship.

The Sandinista regime has shown that an autocracy can entrench itself without ever rolling tanks into the streets: it is enough to control the judicial system, co-opt the branches of the State, issue repressive laws, and strip institutions of their substance. Ortega represents a "model" that is observed and, in some cases, imitated. Governments that restrict the press, discredit social protest, instrumentalize the courts, and cling to power through "legal" reforms find in Nicaragua both an inspiration and a silent complicity.

9 Organization of American States. *Informe sobre Nicaragua y resolución de condena al régimen Ortega-Murillo.* AG/RES. 2948. Washington, D.C.: OEA, 2021.
"Informe del Grupo de Expertos en Derechos Humanos sobre Nicaragua: Violaciones generalizadas y sistemáticas de los derechos humanos desde abril de 2018", United Nations Human Rights Council, March 2023. A/HRC/52/63.

Likewise, the passivity of regional mechanisms for democratic protection has seriously weakened the inter-American framework. Nicaragua's exit from the OAS, the ineffectiveness of its resolutions, and the limited pressure from the United Nations system expose the fragility of the institutional framework meant to safeguard democracy. In the face of this vacuum, regional civil society must rethink its strategies, build transnational solidarity networks, and practice a bolder, firmer citizen diplomacy. We Nicaraguans have stood on the front lines; now greater definition and political clarity are required.

The case of Nicaragua challenges the democracies of the continent to take a stand. Neutrality is not possible in the face of a dictatorship. Every gesture of indifference strengthens authoritarianism. Every timid statement lends it legitimacy. By contrast, every act of active solidarity, every just sanction, every clear denunciation keeps alive the hope that freedom can still be won.

Democracy cannot defend itself. It requires vigilant citizens, solid institutions, and a coherent international community. In Nicaragua, the decomposition of the republican system unfolded in plain sight, as much of the world turned a blind eye, and many actors inside the country underestimated the destructive capacity of the Ortega-Murillo regime.

Holding the opposition responsible for the enthronement of dictatorships is a form of self-flagellation. What is truly our responsibility is to achieve a silent organization within the country that can serve as an alternative for the "day after." The fall of the regime—as if a single man encapsulated all the damage —does not, by itself, guarantee a functional democracy, much less an orderly transition. Strategic political organization can. Moreover,

it is essential to capitalize on this moment of exile to forge a national vision and build real alternatives, free from clientelism, caudillismo, and fear.

I consider it essential, in the balance of forces, that the continent's democratic governments —including the United States and the European Union— increase the political consequences of repression. It is indispensable to maintain and reinforce a sanctions strategy focused on the income streams that sustain the regime, as well as to condition or suspend loans through international cooperation mechanisms. Free trade agreements should be monitored for compliance with democratic and human rights clauses, and suspended if those clauses are not upheld. At the same time, political and material support should be provided to victims, human rights defenders, and journalists. Only then can the regime be compelled to come to the negotiating table, for the good of the country and the entire region.[10]

In this scenario, the "globalized resistance" is today one of the most powerful assets against the regime's impunity. Unity should be seen as a means, not an end: the current condition is not a uniform opposition, although it is possible to carry out joint actions by finding common ground amid differences, building a single message with multiple voices. With a strategic vision for an orderly transition. Fragmentation and distrust have been weapons that the regime has effectively promoted. Overcoming them requires dialogue, will, and coordinated action.

Nicaragua needs an opposition that stands firm and offers solutions; that not only exposes the dictator, but emerges as

10 U.S. Customs and Border Protection. *Southwest Land Border Encounters.* Abril de 2024. https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-land-border-encounters

a genuine alternative after his fall. An opposition capable of building a radically different democracy: a democracy that does not forget, that does not repeat past mistakes, and that places the free and dignified individual at the heart of the national project.

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