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The Cost of Doing Politics in Venezuela

Explaining Venezuela during the dark era of Chavismo is certainly a challenge. Not because there are few elements, but because there are too many. We can speak of the complex humanitarian emergency, designed from within power and used as a tool of social control. We can speak of the largest forced migration in the contemporary world that is not the consequence of a conventional war or a large-scale natural disaster, but of a deliberate policy of impoverishment. We can speak of the systematic electoral frauds, with that of July 28, 2024 being the most crude, obscene, and decisive. We can speak of the corruption that has stripped Venezuelans of hundreds of billions of dollars while filling the pockets of small groups both inside the country and abroad. We can speak of the symbiosis between the tyranny that has hijacked our territory, organized crime, drug trafficking, international terrorism, and other allied autocracies. We can –and must– speak of the crimes against humanity investigated by the International Criminal Court and of state terrorism, as defined by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

All of that is necessary. But this time, I wish to focus on something else: on the concrete, everyday, and human cost of doing politics in Venezuela. On what it means to decide to dedicate one's life to the defense of human rights in a country where violating

them is state policy. On what it means to practice journalism when freedom of speech is considered a threat. On what it means to analyze, write, investigate, or think critically when knowledge itself is seen as an enemy. Ultimately, on what it costs—in terms of security, family, freedom, and life—to oppose the most terrible barbarity in our history.

A Tyranny without Euphemisms

Venezuela is not living under a “hybrid authoritarian regime,” nor under an “illiberal democracy,” nor under an “imperfect dictatorship.” Much less, of course, is it living under a democratic model “with problems.” Venezuela is facing a tyranny, plain and simple, without euphemisms. And not just any tyranny, but a narco-terrorist tyranny, one that combines the classic vices of despotism with the typical logistics of mafias and terrorist groups.

This is key from both a narrative and even an academic standpoint. Unlike the bureaucratic-military dictatorships of the twentieth century, Chavismo evolved into a model in which power is sustained not only through state coercion, but also through transnational criminal networks, illicit economies, irregular armed groups, and alliances with global authoritarian actors. In this context, thinking is dangerous. Thinking differently is subversive. And expressing it publicly effectively becomes a crime.

Doing politics in Venezuela —or even being close to it— is not about competing over ideas within an institutional framework; it is about surviving within a hostile ecosystem designed to persecute, threaten, and destroy all dissent.

Activism as a Crime

Imagining political activism in Venezuela requires setting aside the traditional categories of comparative political science. It is not only about persecuted national leaders. It is about a thorough form of persecution that reaches down to the very last link of the social organization.

Engaging in politics entails risk from the highest to the most basic level: from those who lead a candidacy to those who organize a neighborhood meeting in a parish, in a residential area, on a street, or in any community. From those who denounce in international forums to those who distribute flyers or mobilize voters. From those who use academia as a space for critical thinking to those who write on social media. The regime understands that democratic politics is not defeated merely by imprisoning visible leaders, but by breaking the organizational fabric. By instilling fear. By forcing silence.

After the electoral fraud of July 28, 2024, that logic intensified. According to journalistic investigations¹, at least 408 activists, leaders, journalists, and human rights defenders were forced into hiding or had to leave the country urgently after that date. This is not about planned exile, but about flight: without farewells, without guarantees, without a clear return. And, in addition, with the fear of what may happen to their families, as we are speaking of a regime that practices *Sippenhaft* —that Nazi practice of kidnapping relatives of dissidents to pressure them.

1 <https://storage.googleapis.com/qurium/armando.info/de-la-clandestinidad-al-exilio-el-trayecto-urgente-de-cientos-de-venezolanos-despues-del-28j.html>

In many cases, the first step was not exile, but clandestinity: borrowed houses, phones turned off, total isolation, minimal communication, escape routes evaluated in silence. Politics thus becomes a parallel life, marked by paranoia, anxiety, and the total loss of normality.

Repression as Public Policy

The data confirm that this is not a case of isolated abuses, but of a systematic state policy. According to the NGO *Foro Penal*, at the time of writing this article there are 893 political prisoners in Venezuela (174 military personnel, 119 women, and four teenagers). According to the NGO *Justicia, Encuentro y Perdón*, the figure rises to 1,081 people kidnapped by Chavismo, including twelve human rights defenders and twenty trade unionists. The number varies from week to week, but the pattern is stable: arbitrary detentions, temporary enforced disappearances, torture, cruel treatment, and precautionary measures that function as prolonged punishments.

Among these prisoners are prominent figures such as Javier Tarazona, director of *Fundaredes*, detained for documenting the presence of irregular armed groups and human rights violations in border areas, and Rocío San Miguel, president of *Control Ciudadano*, detained by the state for analyzing and denouncing the militarization of power and corruption within the Armed Forces. In both cases, the “crime” was exercising the right to investigate, inform, and warn.

The concept of “freedom” is emptied of meaning when thousands of people live under mandatory court appearances, travel bans, constant surveillance, or direct threats against their families. In political science terms, this constitutes a form of preventive repression: it is not only what has been done that is punished, but what could be done. And, of course, whether or not a real crime

exists –which it never does– is irrelevant; what matters is what the de facto power decides to punish.

In the aftermath of July 28, 2024, repression reached unprecedented levels: more than 2,500 arbitrary detentions in just hours, dozens killed in protests, mass raids, and a campaign of terror aimed at suppressing any social reaction. This was accompanied by the intensification of the infamous *Operación Tuntún* (Operation Knock Knock), openly announced by the regime itself as a mechanism of persecution.

One of the most brutal cases is that of Lauriannys Cedeño, a 16-year-old girl abducted on August 14, 2024, in Carúpano, Sucre, for having forwarded WhatsApp messages expressing dissatisfaction with the electoral results. Reported by a pro-government militant linked to the local *Unidad de Batalla Hugo Chávez* (UBCh), Lauriannys suffered a nervous breakdown during her detention that caused permanent neurological damage. She now suffers from seizures and panic attacks. Her “crime” was to express an opinion.

People are punished for engaging in politics and punished for speaking about politics. They are punished, in general, for attempting to build a republic while barbarism seeks to destroy it. And age, gender, activity, or place do not matter. As Milovan Djilas wrote in *La Nueva Clase*: “because of its monopoly and its totalitarianism, the new class inevitably finds itself at war with everything it does not administer or control, and must deliberately seek to defeat or destroy it.”

Engaging in Politics Abroad: Transnational Terror

The cost of engaging in politics against the Chavista narco-tyranny does not end at Venezuela’s borders. On the contrary,

in recent years the transnational reach of the regime's political violence has become evident.

The murder of former Venezuelan lieutenant Ronald Ojeda in Chile, abducted and executed with clear indications of the involvement of criminal networks linked to Chavismo, marked a turning point. Similarly, the attempted assassination of activists Luis Peche and Yendri Velásquez in Bogotá confirmed that exile does not guarantee safety. The message is clear: dissent can be persecuted even outside the country.

This constitutes a pattern of extraterritorial repression, characteristic of regimes that no longer operate as entities confined to the nation-state, but rather as criminal organizations with operational capacity across the region.

Defending Human Rights in a State That Violates Them

If engaging in politics is dangerous, defending human rights is even more so. In Venezuela, NGOs are not seen as civil actors, but as internal enemies. Documenting abuses, supporting victims, denouncing disappearances or torture is considered a direct threat to those in power.

Those who work in this field face not only the risk of detention, but also campaigns of stigmatization, asset freezes, raids, legal criminalization, and persecution of family members. Defending political prisoners becomes, paradoxically, a cause that generates new political prisoners.

This responds to a clear logic: to destroy mechanisms of accountability and isolate victims. The regime understands that the greatest threat is not international denunciation in itself, but

the accumulation of evidence, testimonies, and documentation that undermine its official narrative.

Journalism Under Siege

Journalism in Venezuela is no longer practiced under prior censorship, but under censorship by terror. There is no need to formally ban a word when it is known that using it may result in the closure of a media outlet, dismissal, imprisonment, or exile.

Today, there are more than twenty journalists imprisoned in Venezuela. Others have been forced to flee. Dozens practice forced self-censorship in order to survive. But what is most revealing is that not even extreme self-censorship guarantees protection.

In 2025, journalists who had spent years practicing a form of self-censorship that bordered on official propaganda (avoiding sensitive topics, softening language, reproducing regime statements) were dismissed from radio stations simply for mentioning that a Venezuelan woman had won the Nobel Peace Prize. Some barely developed the story. Others did not even mention the name María Corina Machado. It was enough to say, “a Venezuelan woman won the Nobel.” Just that.

The message is brutal: not even silence is enough.

The cost is not only professional; it is existential. The journalist measures every word, every headline, every adjective. The mistake is not correctable: it can be definitive. And yet, many continue reporting. Because remaining silent also carries an unbearable moral cost.

Academia, Thought, and Speech

Not even academic analysis escapes persecution. Professors, researchers, writers, and analysts have been harassed, threatened, forced into silence or exile. In some cases, the reason was as simple –and as brutal– as a social media post.

This reveals a central feature of late-stage Chavismo: fear of thought. Not armed thought, nor conspiratorial thought, but critical thinking. The tyranny understands that those who name reality weaken it.

For that reason, writing becomes an act of resistance. Analyzing becomes a form of militancy. Publishing data becomes a provocation.

Exile as Political Punishment

There are now nearly nine million Venezuelan migrants and refugees. Not all of them are activists, but a significant portion of recent political exile is directly the result of post-July 28 repression.

Exile is not only a geographic displacement. It is a rupture of life itself. Many left without saying goodbye to their parents, their children, their siblings. Others left knowing they might never see them again. The emotional cost is incalculable.

There are paradigmatic cases: people who left the country for the first time in their lives at sixty years old, not by choice, but for survival. Broken up families. Lives put on hold. Identities suspended.

Exile serves a dual function for the tyranny: it removes opponents from the territory and disperses resistance, forcing it to reorganize from abroad.

Doing Politics Without Farewells

Perhaps the cruelest cost of doing politics in Venezuela is precisely this: the impossibility of saying goodbye. There is no ritual, no closure, no transition. Departure is abrupt. Silence is mandatory. The embrace is postponed indefinitely.

Doing politics means accepting the real possibility of not returning. Of not burying one's parents. Of not seeing one's children grow up. Of becoming an absence. And yet, thousands continue to do so.

The Price of Dignity

Doing politics in Venezuela is not a career, nor an ambition, nor an electoral strategy. It is an ethical decision. One that is paid for with security, with stability, with family, with freedom, and, in many cases, with life.

Chavismo has managed to transform political participation into a high-risk act. But it has also achieved something more dangerous for itself: creating a citizenry that knows exactly how much freedom costs.

And still, it continues to demand it.

Because if there is one thing the Venezuelan experience proves, it is that tyrannies may control territories, bodies, and silences—but they never fully manage to control ideas, nor memory, nor speech.

One of the hardest things at the beginning –the toughest part– is that you are torn away from your loved ones and from your life overnight. There is no time to say goodbye, for that last hug, that last kiss, that last family meal. Everything happens so fast that you are not given time to process it.

That sudden rupture is intertwined with something equally difficult: uncertainty.

Uncertainty about where you will live, how long you will be able to stay in one country, whether tomorrow you will have to move to another, how long a job will last, or whether you will be able to put down roots without feeling that you are betraying your country.

Added to all of this is a reality that almost no one talks about: living out of a suitcase.

Constant moves, living between hotels, borrowed rooms, or Airbnbs, the impossibility of renting because you lack legal mechanisms... all of that strips away the most basic sense of stability. When everything you own fits in a suitcase, when nothing is truly yours or permanent, when what you knew is left behind, the emotional toll is enormous. Everything feels temporary. Everything feels borrowed. Everything demands more energy than it seems.

And yet, as you begin to build routines, friendships, or small anchors, another difficult feeling appears: the idea that every step forward is also a step further away from Venezuela. You know rationally that it is not so –that you need stability and a life of your own– but the mind insists on that silent guilt.