

# An opposition that does not oppose

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When looking at the political history of Venezuela from the early years of the so-called Bolivarian Revolution, one of its most notable characteristics was the pronounced dichotomy and division of society between Chavismo and the opposition. This process of social polarization intensified especially during the period 2000-2004 when various institutions (educational, religious, community-based, police, military, media, academic, etc.) and different social sectors took sides in favor of or against one of two positions: the government or the opposition<sup>1</sup>.

The generation of those years grew up and developed in a society in conflict and divided between “the good guys and the bad guys,” regardless of which side they were on. Between the “reds” and the “blues,” between the illusion of change that was only possible if their side was in power, between the perpetuation of the new authoritarianism in the country and the fear of what was to come. Families, friends, work groups, and neighbors were engulfed in a sea of polarization, where political conversation was always present in gathering places and common areas, and

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1 Mireya Lozada, “¿Nosotros o Ellos? Representaciones Sociales, polarización y espacio Público en Venezuela”, Scielo (*Cuadernos del Cendes*, December 2008), obtained from: [http://ve.scielo.org/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S101225082008000300006](http://ve.scielo.org/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S101225082008000300006)

one side believed that it was possible to change the government through institutional and democratic means.

Over the years, a group ensured that they would never relinquish power, and with the death of the patriarch of the regime and the need for adaptation and survival, especially after a Complex Humanitarian Emergency and waves of protests, the government of Nicolás Maduro gradually erased that duality that characterized the country's politics, turning it into a photograph full of shades of gray, making it increasingly difficult for the population to identify the actors, positions, and, above all, to point out the "guilty parties".

Venezuela is in a new stage of political conflict, with a ruler who inherited a hybrid regime (competitive authoritarianism) and turned it into full-fledged authoritarianism, or as referred to in this article, hegemonic authoritarianism. That is why there is a need to analyze its new characteristics in depth, to understand that they are not static in their way of existing, and to avoid the mistake of interpreting the new reality through the lens of the past decade. In this reality, the opposition was seen as a moderately homogeneous bloc with actors pursuing the same goal: achieving a change of government. Currently, everything is shades of gray. The situation is not that simple.

This text does not aim to delve into the complexity of this new stage but rather to focus on two aspects that allowed its consolidation: The difference between the Chávez and Maduro regimes, and the techniques used by power against the opposition to gradually turn it into an opposition that does not oppose.

## **Background**

The era of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela was a period of political and social transformation, which saw the emergence of a strong opposition, primarily characterized by its rejection of the Chavista government's centralization policies and its authoritarian governance style. This opposition comprised a wide range of groups, including political parties, civil society organizations, business leaders, and student groups, who sought a change in the country's direction and feared the path on which their nation was heading.

It is important to note that the claim that the opposition and Venezuelans "never did anything" to change the government is far from reality, and within that narrative, there's a manipulation by a regime that strengthens its control strategies and justifies popular frustration. The is not to imply that the opposition was flawless and free of errors; nor is it to suggest that the government bears sole responsibility for the unsuccessful attempts at democratic transition. It is necessary to consider a complex causality where nuances exist, so discarding dichotomous views is a priority, as they cloud the overall understanding of the situation. The Venezuelan political landscape is unpredictable and constantly changing, with a regime that gradually mutates and evolves in its techniques of manipulation and control.

However, while the opposition group coordinated attempts at civil resistance and used all available institutional methods within the already battered Venezuelan democracy, they witnessed a government responding by intensifying its authoritarian processes, refining its strategies against the population and the opposition, and mutating to survive and remain in power. With a dying Chávez pointing out with his finger who the "people"

should choose as his successor, it was the final proof that only vestiges of democracy remained.

To better illustrate the Venezuelan opposition's attempts to bring about a change of government, the following are mentioned as the most decisive milestones:

### **Civic and oil strikes and coup d'état**

Margarita López Maya describes the major milestones of the beginning of the century as follows:

Between late 2001 and January 2003, six confrontations took place in Venezuelan society between the government and the opposition. In December 2001, the confrontation led to a civic strike, the first of four, which was met with the hardening of the presidential discourse and threats from government party leaders against the democratic order. From then on, polarization and confrontation intensified, culminating in the second civic strike in April 2002, which served as a prelude to the coup d'état on the 11th. With this coup and Chavez's return to power 48 hours later, the depth of the Venezuelan sociopolitical fracture was revealed, and a political crisis ensued. The dialogue, negotiation, and agreement initiatives attempted in the following months did not produce significant results. In that December, an impasse was reached once again between the two blocs, leading the opposition to organize a fourth civic strike, which, like in April, resulted in an insurrectional situation<sup>2</sup>.

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2 Margarita López Maya, *Insurrecciones de 2002 en Venezuela. Causa e implicaciones*, (CLACSO, 2003).

### The recall referendum of 2004

In August 2004, the opposition organized a petition to call for a referendum to revoke Chávez's presidential mandate. Over 2 million Venezuelans signed the petition, and the referendum took place in August 2004. Although the referendum's result favored Chávez, the opposition won 40% of the votes, demonstrating their electoral strength and popular support, once again highlighting the country's polarization.

### The presidential elections of 2012/2013

In October 2012, the opposition presented Henrique Capriles Radonski as their presidential candidate to challenge Chávez in the presidential elections. Chávez won the election, but shortly after his victory, he passed away, leading to another presidential election between Capriles and Maduro. The result was a victory for Maduro, amidst protests of electoral fraud.

### The 2014 protests

In February 2014, a series of protests began throughout the country against the government of Maduro, who had assumed the presidency after Chávez's death. The protests were called for by students and civil society, and were violently suppressed by security forces. The protests continued for several months and resulted in the death of over 40 people. The repressive and dictatorial nature of the government became increasingly evident.

### The legislative elections of 2015

In December 2015, the opposition achieved a historic victory in the parliamentary elections, obtaining a qualified majority in

the National Assembly. The opposition's victory was a blow to the government of Maduro, who had been reelected in 2013.

### 2017 protests

The protests began in April 2017 after the Supreme Court of Justice (TSJ) issued a ruling dissolving the National Assembly, which was controlled by the opposition. This, combined with the country's economic collapse leading to one of the highest inflation rates in the world, prompted people to take to the streets to demand the restoration of the legislative power and denounce the growing government repression.

The government's response to the protests was violent. Security forces used tear gas, bullets, and other methods to disperse the demonstrators, leading to numerous violent clashes. It was reported that at least 125 people were killed during the protests. The world's attention turned to Venezuela due to the blatant human rights violations during the protests and the escalating humanitarian and economic crisis.

### Proclamation of Juan Guaidó as interim president

The leader of Voluntad Popular assumed the presidency of the National Assembly elected in 2015, and later used his position to drive a new wave against the government, this time more institutional and focused on international support. It was one of the most challenging moments for the government. In the end, they survived.

Among the mentioned milestones, it is important to emphasize the legislative elections of 2015, as it was the decisive turning point in the process of autocratization of the

Venezuelan government system: It transitioned from a *competitive authoritarianism* to a completely closed and *hegemonic* one. The following section defines and characterizes each one:

## Types of political regime

### Competitive authoritarianism

In competitive authoritarian regimes, formal democratic institutions are considered the primary means to obtain and exercise political authority. However, rulers violate democratic rules so frequently and to such an extent that the regime fails to meet the conventional minimum criteria for democracy. The rulers in these regimes violate democratic norms enough to create an uneven playing field between the government and the opposition. Although elections are held regularly, and usually without massive fraud, rulers systematically abuse the media, harass opposition candidates and their supporters, and in some cases manipulate electoral results. Journalists, opposition politicians, and other government critics can be spied on, threatened, harassed, or detained<sup>3</sup>.

In this type of regime:

1. The ruling party or coalition dominates the state, uses state resources for its own benefit, and relies on state institutions such as the police and judiciary to harass, intimidate, or even imprison political opponents.

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3 Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way., "Elections Without Democracy. The rise of competitive authoritarianism", *Journal of Democracy*, 2002.

2. The opposition enjoys limited political rights and freedoms, and is often subjected to arbitrary detentions, harassment, or physical violence.
3. Civil society and the media are often co-opted, repressed, or subjected to censorship, making it difficult for the opposition voices to be heard.

According to the above, it can be affirmed that a) the Venezuelan regime could be broadly classified as competitive authoritarianism, and b) it did not meet the minimum parameters to be considered a democracy, not even a “flawed democracy”. While formal democratic institutions are widely considered the main means to access power, its leaders’ increasing abuse of the Venezuelan state gives them a significant advantage over their opponents.

Under Chávez, Venezuela frequently held periodic and multiparty elections that, in general, appeared to be free and fair. The electoral façade gave them legitimacy to govern the country arbitrarily under the pretext of the “will of the people”. However, in 2015, a few years into Maduro’s government, the excuse for popular power through elections ceased to be viable. The government became vulnerable and needed to manipulate the tentacles of the State and its institutions to remain in power, obstructing the Legislative Branch and leaving the 2015 elections as the last electoral event where the population could effectively choose.

They made sure to close any avenue for the opposition to reach power institutionally, resulting in a consolidated and hegemonic authoritarianism.



## Hegemonic authoritarianism

In this type of authoritarianism, “there can be a formally recognized political authority that assumes almost all political power. Despite having experienced processes of political liberalization, such as the recognition of political pluralism, only the parties or candidates associated with the ruling power have a real possibility of accessing public positions and institutions. Therefore, elections, although they may be pluralistic, exclude the opposition and are thus not competitive. Likewise, rights and freedoms are highly restricted and continuously subject to threats from the authorities. Certain ethnic, religious, and regional groups may be marginalized in terms of civil rights, and significant conflicts may exist in some of these areas”<sup>4</sup>.

Therefore, hegemonic authoritarianism is understood as a type of authoritarian regime in which a single political party or coalition dominates the political system and controls all aspects of political life but allows a certain level of opposition and civil society participation. This type of regime combines formal institutions such as elections and courts with informal networks of power and influence that operate outside of these institutions, enabling the ruling party or coalition to maintain control over the political system and society as a whole.

The key characteristic of hegemonic authoritarianism is the “dual structure of power” created by the ruling party or coalition. This dual structure includes formal institutions such

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4 Inmaculada Szmolka Vida, “Los regímenes políticos híbridos: Democracias y autoritarismos con adjetivos. Su conceptualización, categorización y operacionalización dentro de la tipología de regímenes políticos”, *Revista de Estudios Políticos*, Universidad de Granada, 2010.

as elections and courts, as well as informal networks of power and influence operating outside of these institutions<sup>5</sup>. The ruling party or coalition utilizes this dual structure to maintain control over the political system and society as a whole, allowing them to implement all the “playbook” strategies against anyone who opposes them, even within their own ranks. The current government of Nicolas Maduro in the country serves as the best example of this phenomenon.

### **What explains, then, the evolution of the regime type in Venezuela? What role does the opposition play?**

The change in the game’s rules for an opposition that was never prepared for the authoritarian and repressive political system transformation is relevant to explain the shift between types of authoritarianism in the country. While the government found ways to keep its coalition strategically united against any threat, the opposition struggled more and more to unite in order to confront the sole adversary. It is for this reason that, upon recognizing the weakness of a fragmented opposition, the government<sup>6</sup> implemented traditional strategies of division, which are explained below:

To mitigate the persistent threats that cannot be eliminated through free elections, authoritarian regimes have two strategies up their sleeve: repression and cooptation. These strategies are not mutually exclusive, but rather the political context determines

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5 Guillermo O’Donnell, *El Estado Burocrático Autoritario* (Editorial Belgrano 1982).

6 Both Chavez and Maduro, but in the article, the focus is on the government of Maduro.

the manner and aggressiveness with which one or the other is applied<sup>7</sup>.

**Repression:** Repression is perhaps the most obvious survival strategy in authoritarian or dictatorial regimes. It is fundamental and constitutes part of their nature and way of governing. It is a form of sociopolitical control the authorities apply against those who engage in activities or hold beliefs that the regime perceives as threatening to political order<sup>8</sup>. This is effective as it increases the costs of opposing the government, making disloyalty the least attractive option. Governing through fear.

Repression comes in many forms depending on the ruler's purpose; the two main categories are *a*) repression of empowerment rights and *b*) repression of physical integrity rights. The first form of repression targets civil liberties: censorship, restrictions on civil associations, and other actions that typically affect the general population. The second form of repression primarily affects individuals and is the most severe: torture, forced disappearances, and increased political prisoners.

Nicolas Maduro has been accused of human rights violations through the worst type of repression, systematically carried out within his ranks. However, currently, the following type of strategy predominates due to the government's need for an institutional facade in front of the international community.

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7 Erica Frantz and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, "A dictator's toolkit: Understanding how co-optation affects repression in autocracies", *Journal of Peace Research*, 2014.

8 Robert Goldstein, *Political repression in Modern America: From 1870 to the Present*, (Cambridge, 1978).

**Cooptation:** Cooptation is defined as the intentional extension of government benefits to opposition elites by autocratic leaders in exchange for their loyalty, acquiescence, or cooperation. Autocrats coopt opposition party leaders by providing them access to patronage resources, appointing them to key political positions, and/or granting them limited political concessions. In return, opposition leaders are expected to cooperate with the rulers by supporting their political initiatives and refraining from undertaking collective actions against the regime<sup>9</sup>.

Accumulating loyalties through cooptation is instrumental in maintaining political order, as repression comes with its costs and increases popular discontent, becoming a breeding ground for protests. Therefore, “encapsulating” opposition groups (political parties, business federations, significant segments of the population) is important because it allows the autocratic regime to control them so that, in any circumstance, especially when they feel destabilized, they can be used in their favor and help improve their image. Cooptation is particularly effective when these groups are integrated into state institutions.

Cooptation is insidious, as coopted opposition members often remain within their parties while following a conciliatory line in line with the objectives of the authoritarian regime. Many of them have their own parties, which, in exchange for the aforementioned benefits, are allowed minor public positions that do not threaten the stability of the government in power. Over time, this leads to different “oppositions” that differ in their objectives. This is how authoritarian regimes manufacture an opposition that does not truly oppose them.

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9 Berker Kavasoglu, *Opposition Parties and Elite Co-optation in Electoral Autocracies*, (V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg, 2021).

Having discussed the two predominant strategies of authoritarianism, it is important to emphasize the current reality in Venezuela. The objective of the article is to highlight the contrast between an opposition that once confronted the regime and the current opposition, which has been driven into a kind of clandestinity, with many covertly coopted faces, while there are other parties and leaders who are openly aligned with the regime. With Venezuela entering a new political phase, there is an opportunity for opposition regrouping, albeit in a much more limited and dangerous context where distrust prevails, and the tools for opposition become increasingly perilous. Adding to this is the population's apathy, as they do not see true representatives in the opposition, and the government propaganda attempting to sell a stability and economic boom that is far from reality.

Perhaps the most vocal opposition currently is the one that does not truly oppose, but the discontent among the people longing for freedom is growing. The opposition will hold significant untapped political capital, waiting to be harnessed honestly and responsibly.