

# From the Manual of Authoritarianism: The Destruction of Public Space (The Case of Venezuela)

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The construction and protection of public space are directly correlated with the state of civil and political liberties. Therefore, its robustness indicates a society's democratic quality, creating an adversary of authoritarian regimes, which seek to prevent the germination and spread of ideas and social movements that challenge the ruling political power.

Public space, as a place for building social identity and a catalyst for political transformations, originates in ancient Greece, considered the cradle of Western civilization. The concept of the public square as a physical space for civil gatherings and assemblies, facilitating joint decision-making, gained prominence there. This concept became the foundation for the separation of powers and the original meaning of democracy as it is known today.

Defined as the place where every citizen has the right to move, be, and act,<sup>1</sup> public space becomes the foundation of democratic structures, allowing citizens to move freely and participate in consolidating a more democratic and inclusive society.

The democratic, inclusive, mobilizing, and transformative nature of public space drives authoritarian regimes to confine, diminish, and ultimately dominate it. To achieve this, power structures employ fear as a weapon to repress citizens' natural impulse to transform an ecosystem that restricts their freedoms, aiming to change the political model.

Authoritarian regimes' goal in their struggle to remain in power is to eradicate dissent and prevent political transformation. Over the past few years, ProBoxVE has studied patterns in the methods used by authoritarian regimes in the region to control the narrative and dominate public space.

Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua, and, in some instances, El Salvador emerge as Latin American countries where power seeks to prohibit, curtail, and weaken the structures that protect civil and political liberties while attacking public spaces on multiple fronts. These regimes seem to follow a sort of guide to avoid the alternation of power at all costs.

The *Manual del Dictador* (Dictator's Manual) is structured into five sections, each generating specific actions that

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1 Julio Alguacil, "Espacio público y espacio político. La ciudad como el lugar para las estrategias de participación". *Polis Revista de la Universidad Bolivariana*. (20). Retrieved from: <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=30502011>

progressively diminish public space and undermine the foundations of a democratic country. The breakdown of democratic institutions, media censorship and attacks on freedom of speech, persecution of dissident actors, creation of legal frameworks to regulate communications and manipulation of public discourse are the foundations for specific strategies. Together, these strategies form an ideal structure to consolidate an authoritarian apparatus that dominates and oppresses the space from which the social fabric and public opinion are built.

In Venezuela, public space has been cornered and diminished over the past 25 years through policies progressively and continuously implemented by the Chavista regime to avoid the alternation of power and establish itself as the sole political actor. This has been achieved through a radical change in the institutional structure via multiple legal reforms and censorship, domination of media narratives, persecution of dissent, and manipulation of narratives on social media. The ruling party has built a robust structure to consolidate its power, employing a scheme that seeks to validate itself through ostensibly democratic elections while excluding the participation of actors who pose a real threat of change to its power structure.

### **The Lost Institutionalality in Venezuela**

Since Hugo Chávez came to power in 1999, Venezuela has undergone structural changes within its institutions. The immediate creation of a new constitution through a Constituent Assembly, which replaced the then Congress of the Republic,

marks the beginning of a series of legal changes and mobilizations that restructured the order and functioning of the country's institutions.

The progressive destruction of the independence between public powers (executive, legislative, and judicial) and the creation of new powers (citizen and electoral) laid the foundation for the domination of Chavismo throughout the public structure. With great popularity, Hugo Chávez's government had the necessary votes to control the National Assembly, from which the representatives of the other powers were appointed, thereby consolidating total dominion of the institutions that safeguard democracy. However, that was not enough; both Chávez and Maduro usurped the functions of the legislature (despite it being in their favor) through the figure of the Enabling Law, introduced in the new Constitution, which grants the Executive the power to legislate by decree. This consolidated the structure of totalitarianism centered on the executive.

Deinstitutionalization changed through the powers' domination and "reengineering" and establishing a new hegemony in popular and military power.<sup>2</sup> Consolidating communal councils as local power entities and restructuring the military institution, which took on a political-partisan character, aimed to garner greater support for Hugo Chávez's entrenchment in the presidential chair. Additionally,

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2 Roberto Mansilla, *El Legado de Chávez: Estructuras de poder e institucionalidad en la era "post chavista"* (2014). Retrieved from <https://www.igadi.gal/es/analise/el-legado-de-chavez-estructuras-de-poder-e-institucionalidad-en-la-venezuela-post-chavista/>

introducing new property types (community, social, state) provided the basis for undermining private property and a wave of expropriation. It is estimated that during Chávez's 13 years in power, 1,440 expropriations, including companies, warehouses, and land, were carried out.<sup>3</sup>

In this manner, the Chavista government dominated the public powers until independence was completely blurred in its range of action. It ensured the support of the military power along with the surveillance of its supporters in the communal sphere. It also established itself, to the detriment of the economy, as the largest employer by expropriating private companies and generating laws to strengthen its ideology throughout the country's institutional framework.

### **Censorship of Traditional and Digital Media**

For many, the breaking point in Chavismo's construction of a communication hegemony and media censorship was marked by the non-renewal of the concession to the television channel RCTV in 2007. This was followed by the purchase of other national television channels and print media by businessmen with interests aligned with Chavismo in 2013 and the closure of print media due to a lack of paper, primarily affecting those not aligned with Chavismo. This escalation included the closure of radio stations throughout the country since 2003.

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3 "Hugo Chávez expropió casi 1.200 empresas en diez años". *El Economista*, 2013. Retrieved from: <https://www.eleconomista.com.mx/empresas/Hugo-Chavez-expropio-casi-1200-empresas-en-diez-anos-20130307-0045.html>

Currently, the restriction on access to information and freedom of expression in Venezuela through traditional media is nearly total. Many opposition spokespersons have been censored in the traditional media since Juan Guaidó was proclaimed interim President in 2019 following the contested 2018 presidential elections. As a result of this progressive censorship, social networks have become almost the only space for the opposition or dissidents to express their messages, which poses a significant challenge in a country with structural problems in internet service.

Twenty years after the approval of the Law of Social Responsibility of Radio and Television, commonly known as the Gag Law, which began the construction of a legal framework to censor traditional media under Conatel's supervision,<sup>4</sup> the Chavista government continues to reinforce censorship on an even greater scale.

The most recent **Law against Fascism**, which was approved in its first discussion in the National Assembly on April 2, 2024, represents a new level of generalized censorship,<sup>5</sup> aside from fines previously established in the *Ley Mordaza* (Gag Law), this law **introduces penalties of up to 12 years of imprisonment for non-compliance**. For instance, Article 11 of this law stipulates that radio, television, electronic media, print

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4 "Sin voz ni voto: La Ley que perpetúa el autoritarismo en Venezuela". *ProBox*, 2024. Retrieved from: <https://proboxve.org/publicacion/sin-voz-ni-voto-la-ley-que-perpetua-el-autoritarismo-en-venezuela>

5 Andrés Cañizales, "La Ley Mordaza en Venezuela". *Chasqui, Revista Latinoamericana de Comunicación*, September 2003, no. 83. Retrieved from: <https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/160/16008309.pdf>

media providers, whether public or private, and social networks must ensure spaces free from any fascist, neo-fascist, or similar content, with the definition of fascism left to the regime's discretion.

The impact of censorship established over the years is felt throughout the country. The Institute of Press and Society of Venezuela (IPYS Venezuela), in its study "Atlas of Silence,"<sup>6</sup> reported that by 2022, more than 7 million people (21% of the population) lived in news deserts, areas where access to local information is insufficient.

Digital media also do not escape authoritarian attacks. The new community of independent media, which has found refuge on the Internet from the paper crisis and censorship, is also affected by Conatel's decisions. The regulatory entity has blocked at least 62 websites of independent media and organizations in Venezuela<sup>7</sup> that offer information about the structural crisis the country is experiencing, which the regime wants to conceal.

The blocking of web pages and the digital harassment of citizens, political actors, and social leaders in networks clearly violate digital rights, which the United Nations considers comparable to fundamental human rights.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, it repre-

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6 "Atlas del silencio". Estudio, *Instituto Prensa y Sociedad de Venezuela*. Retrieved from: <https://ipysvenezuela.org/atlas-del-silencio/>

7 "Atlas del silencio"...

8 "Situación de las personas defensoras de derechos humanos en Venezuela", Report, *Centro para los Defensores de la Justicia*. 2024. Retrieved from: <https://centrodefensores.org.ve/?cat=1#:~:text=524%20VIOLACIONES>

sents another step in the curtailment of Venezuelan public space in favor of consolidating the authoritarian Chavista regime.

### **Persecution of Journalists, Activists, and Civil Society**

Authoritarian regimes' quest for public space domination extends beyond attacks on the media; the persecution of journalists, activists, and civil society is also pervasive. At ProBox, we have monitored constant online attacks directed at civil society members who have either confronted or reported irregularities that may challenge Chavismo's status quo.

One of the most notable cases involves the coordinated attack and defamation against journalist Roberto Deniz following his investigation into the illegal dealings of businessman Álex Saab with the Venezuelan government.

On March 17, 2021, Deniz<sup>9</sup> cited a thread of tweets summarizing the investigation published by Armando Info about Álex Saab, triggering a defamation and attack campaign against the journalist under the hashtag #DenizVendePatria, which amassed approximately 8,915 tweets. Our ProBox study then revealed that at least 72 accounts using the tag were likely bots or automated accounts, generating 27.97% of the messages. Upon scrutinizing the accounts involved in the campaign

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9 "Libertad para Saab y cárcel para quienes lo acusen, exige la tropa tuitera". *ProBox*. 2022. Retrieved from: <https://proboxve.org/es/publicacion/libertad-para-saab-y-carcel-para-quienes-lo-acusen-exige-la-tropa-tuitera>



against Deniz and noting the alignment of the original tweet's profile with narratives associated with Radical Officialism, we found that 73.63% of the accounts participating in the trend against Deniz had also engaged in trends promoted by the program "*Con el Mazo Dando*," led by the Chavista leader Diosdado Cabello.

Unfortunately, these are not isolated incidents. By 2023, the Center for Defenders and Justice<sup>10</sup> recorded 524 attacks against defenders, marking a 32% increase compared to 2022. According to the organization, in an electoral context, restrictions on civic and democratic space escalate, leading to the criminalization, repression, and social control of civil society.

The most recent incident involves the arrest of Rocío San Miguel,<sup>11</sup> director of the NGO *Control Ciudadano* (Citizen Control), on February 9, 2024. An unidentified security force took her to an undisclosed location. Sixty hours later, prosecutor Tarek William Saab announced her apprehension "by virtue of an arrest warrant against her for alleged involvement in the conspiracy and attempted assassination plot called White Bracelet."<sup>12</sup>

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10 "Situación de las personas defensoras de derechos humanos en Venezuela" Informe...

11 "#LupaElectoral: el ataque al espacio cívico previo a las presidenciales en Venezuela" *ProBox*, 2024. Retrieved from: [https://proboxve.org/es/publicacion/lupaelectoral -el -ataque -al- espacio- civico- previo-a-las-presidenciales-en-venezuela](https://proboxve.org/es/publicacion/lupaelectoral-el-ataque-al-espacio-civico-previo-a-las-presidenciales-en-venezuela)

12 Own translation.

On February 11, groups of accounts associated with the ruling party and anonymous networks promoting the hashtag #RocíoNoEsSanta on social media platforms, aiming to attack and defame the activist in response to civil society's demand for information on her whereabouts through the hashtag #DondeEstaRocio days earlier.

This is not a single incident in Venezuela; the targeting of citizen organizations has a decade-long history. Since 2014, Vice Minister William Castillo has been describing NGOs as "international franchises" attacking Venezuela, becoming a key figure in discrediting organized civil society.

In January 2021, the Maduro government escalated its direct actions against NGOs and human rights defenders by arresting the directors of *Azul Positivo*. The following month, Javier Tarazona, director of *Fundaredes*, was arrested and remains incarcerated amid continuous judicial delays.

During these events, accounts associated with Radical Officialism,<sup>13</sup> circulated the hashtag #TarazonaMercenario, celebrating his arrest and accusing him of conspiring and "collaborating with the FARC," labeling him a "CIA emissary." This hashtag garnered approximately 1,642 tweets, with 15.29% of its messages likely originating from automated or inauthentic accounts.

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13 "Maduro y la cacería de activistas: caso Javier Tarazona". *ProBox*. 2022. Retrieved from: <https://proboxve.org/es/publicacion/maduro-y-la-caceria-de-activistas-caso-javier-tarazona>

In the same year, with a National Assembly dominated by the ruling party, the draft International Cooperation Law was introduced to the legislative agenda, causing alarm among organized civil society, which was suspected of receiving funds to “destabilize.” Although this proposed law did not progress further in parliament, its principles were mirrored in the instrument approved in 2023 and reintroduced at the beginning of 2024.

Furthermore, opposition politicians have been frequent targets of arrests and attacks throughout the Chavista government’s tenure. The most recent attacks have been directed at María Corina Machado, who currently leads the opposition following her victory in the Opposition Primary held in October 2023.

Since Machado was elected the leader of the opposition, ten of her collaborators have been arrested, with seven remaining in detention, seven more subject to arrest warrants, and six seeking refuge in the embassy of Argentina in Venezuela. Additionally, at ProBox, we have observed that the opposition leader has been subjected to misogynistic attacks on social media.<sup>14</sup> Between January 2023 and January 2024, ProBox identified 74,827 instances of gender-based attacks against María Corina Machado, categorized into three main fronts: disparagement of capabilities (67%), references to the body (21%), and sexualization (12%).

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<sup>14</sup> “La misoginia avanza a la sombra de las tendencias en redes sociales”. *ProBox*, 2024. Retrieved from: <https://proboxve.org/es/publicacion/la-misoginia-avanza-a-la-sombra-de-las-tendencias-en-redes-sociales>

## Legal Frameworks for Internet Regulation

Having nearly completed the regulation of message dissemination through traditional media under Conatel surveillance, the digital public sphere is now facing constraints through legalizing censorship in digital spaces and social media. The approval of the Law against Fascism in its initial discussion seeks to regulate the last available spaces for dissent in Venezuela.<sup>15</sup>

On April 2, Vice President Delcy Rodríguez presented a proposed law against “fascism” on behalf of Nicolás Maduro from the podium of the Venezuelan National Assembly. Concealed within its 30 articles is the total legalization of censorship, repression, and the curtailment of the right to protest.

This proposal also aims to legalize censorship at all levels. Article 11 stipulates that providers of radio, television, electronic media, printed media, both public and private, and social networks must ensure spaces free from fascist, neo-fascist, or similar content. Violators of this law will face imprisonment and hefty fines.

Chapter IV of the law establishes sanctions for “fascist acts” and “apology for fascism”, as well as administrative penalties for those who finance organizations or activities deemed fascist or disseminate “prohibited messages”. The prescribed prison

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15 “Sin voz ni voto: La Ley que perpetúa el autoritarismo en Venezuela”. *ProBox*, 2024. Retrieved from: <https://proboxve.org/publicacion/sin-voz-ni-voto-la-ley-que-perpetua-el-autoritarismo-en-venezuela>

sentences range from six to twelve years, while fines may reach up to \$100,000 for those who finance or promote messages prohibited by law.

### **Manipulation of Digital Discourse**

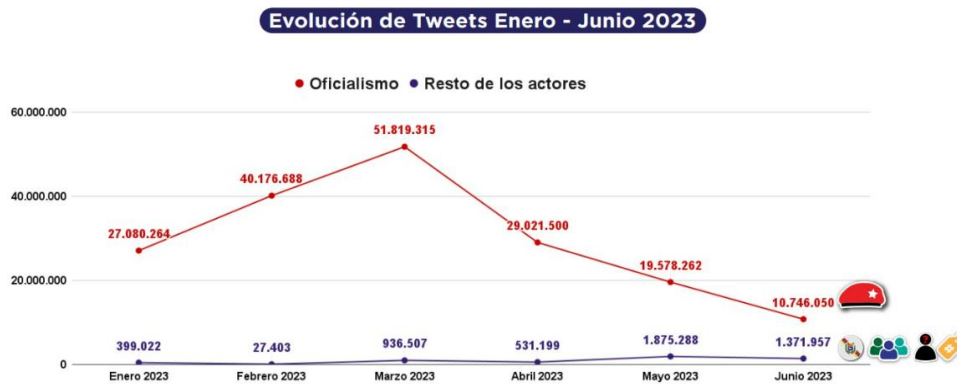
Chavismo has developed and refined a communication strategy to impose its narratives on social media. Twitter, now X, has been the primary platform dominated by Chavismo inorganically for many years. During this time, the ruling party has disseminated propaganda and misinformation and diminished the reach and impact of civil society conversations on this platform.

In 2023, the ruling party was the dominant actor on X, generating 82.1% of socio-political hashtags, a pattern that has persisted since the ProBox Observatory began studying the Venezuelan digital socio-political conversation in 2019.<sup>16</sup>

When examining the number of tweets comprising the 474 trends, the ruling party's dominance is particularly concerning. At least 97.2% of all socio-political messages in Venezuela between January and June 2023 were attributed to hashtags promoted by the State. This translates to over 178 million tweets, with 170 million promoted by the Ministry of Popular Power for Communication and Information (MippCI) alone.

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16 "El Oficialismo y su control de Twitterzuela en lo que va de 2023". *ProBox*, 2024. Retrieved from: <https://proboxve.org/es/publicacion/el-oficialismo-y-su-control-de-twitterzuela-en-lo-que-va-de-2023>



As the presidential election looms, with social networks emerging as crucial public forums for debate, Chavismo's communication prowess in disseminating propaganda and disinformation holds the potential to sway the balance and shape the national public agenda.

Nevertheless, despite Venezuela's classification in the most recent Freedom House report<sup>17</sup> as one of the Latin American countries lacking citizen freedoms, where public space is constrained, it is noteworthy that 2.3 million Venezuelans participated in an independently organized opposition primary aimed at selecting a unity candidate ahead of the 2024 presidential elections. According to the international organization, this underscores Venezuelans' determination to challenge the authoritarian governance of current President Nicolás Maduro through democratic channels and, ultimately, persist in the struggle for the reconstruction of their usurped democracy.

17 "Freedom in the world". Report, *Freedom House* (2024). Retrieved from: [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/FIW\\_2024\\_DigitalBooklet.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/FIW_2024_DigitalBooklet.pdf)