

# Democratization

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# Juan Miguel Matheus: “Political change in Venezuela points to two tasks that must move forward in parallel: achieving democracy and rebuilding the state's capacities”

Isabella Sanfuentes

Currently, some Political Science scholars agree that a potential democratic transition in Venezuela would resemble more the case studies of African countries than the well-known democratization episodes of the final two decades of 20th-century Latin America. The main reason for this lies –besides the sophistication of autocracies in today’s times– in the state’s ability or inability to sustain democracy. A state stripped of capacities is not capable of maintaining democracy. With this context in mind, we spoke with Juan Miguel Matheus about the Venezuelan state’s situation and its democratic prospects.

–In two words: how would you describe the current situation of the Venezuelan state?

Much more than two words are needed to address this question, the answer of which is central to Venezuela's democratic future. I sense that you are prompting me to say that Venezuela is a failed state. Well, yes, it is. I believe that no sensible person could deny it. But those two words –failed state– need to be given meaning through the reality of the situation to reinforce the idea that this problem is not just a theoretical issue, but an eminently practical one: Venezuelans must rebuild our state to achieve one of the ethical preconditions that make possible both the realization of the common good and the relevancy of democracy. Without a robust state that serves the citizens, there is no principle of authority that can order social relations according to justice and guide them toward peace; and without a robust state, it is not possible to provide institutional support for constitutional democracy.

Why do we say it is a failed state? Because it has lost all (or almost all) of its capabilities. This seems somewhat contradictory to the Maduro regime's rigid and harsh autocratic nature. It is incapable of exercising the competencies granted by the Constitution and the rest of the legal system, and public powers are in a state of autocratic subjection. It is unable to fully exercise territorial sovereignty or control the vast national territory, which is constantly threatened by common crime, organized crime, and elements linked to international terrorism. It is incapable of representing the Republic in the concert of free nations, limiting itself to strengthening autocratic solidarity with the world's dictatorial powers: Russia, China, Iran, North Korea, Cuba, Nicaragua, etc. It is incapable of responding to the structural

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demands of a destroyed economy, collapsed public services, and social rights that are non-existent to citizens. Finally, it is incapable of safeguarding human dignity as a radical and ultimate limit to all state powers, having instead become a machine for human rights violations, as fully demonstrated by the United Nations Independent Fact-Finding Mission, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, non-governmental organizations, and human rights defenders.

We have, then, a failed state characterized –one could say– by an institutional deficit, a territorial sovereignty deficit, an international representation deficit, a service deficit, and a deficit in the protection of human rights.

Venezuelans have ahead of us the task of political change, which must begin with the presidential elections on July 28, 2024, in which Edmundo González Urrutia has emerged victorious. This political change points to two tasks that must move forward in parallel: achieving democracy and, at the same time, rebuilding the state's capacities. Or, put another way: we must immediately begin what is known in social sciences as State Building to pave the way for an institutional consolidation of democracy. Otherwise, if we do not start state rebuilding and do not materialize it as quickly as possible, we run the risk of an autocratic regression. And we would have to sadly say that we did not learn the lessons of all these years of Chavismo-Madurismo.

–For years, the term 'failed state' has become popular as a concept to describe the institutional situation of countries like Venezuela and Mexico, for example. In articles for *Democratización*, Paola Bautista de Alemán has used the term 'gangster state.' Do you think these terms accurately

describe the Venezuelan context? Do they add anything to the diagnosis of the Venezuelan state?

Yes, it adds. In the magical realism that we Venezuelans live in –and I ask that the term be understood in a good way– we not only have a failed state but also a gangster state. Or, to be more precise, we are witnessing an autocratic regime of a *sui generis* nature, framed within a state circumstance that is both failed and gangster-like.

I have already referred to the failed aspect. As for the gangster aspect, it is worth clarifying that the Venezuelan autocratic entrenchment far exceeds kleptocracy, which is the category used in Political Science to refer to systems defined by administrative corruption. Such is the case of countries in the former Soviet Union, Africa, and Southeast Asia. In the Venezuelan case, administrative corruption is a terrible affliction, but what is most decisive is that organized crime has become intertwined with the State and key positions of power. A demonstration of this is the so-called ‘narcophews,’ convicted in the United States for drug trafficking offenses. And perhaps the most eloquent fact is that Nicolás Maduro (president), Diosdado Cabello (number two of the ruling party), Maikel Moreno (former president of the Supreme Court of Justice), Tarek El Aissami (former vice president of the economy sector), and Vladimir Padrino López (minister of Defense) have received indictments from the U.S. Department of Justice for crimes related to drug trafficking and terrorism. In other words, the ‘high command’ of the revolution is internationally prosecutable due to its links with organized crime. This turns the Venezuelan state into a criminal theater and, at the same time, a refuge for criminal activities. Organized crime governs the Venezuelan state and also serves as its last bastion, a source of real power.

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But more must be said. Organized crime is the most important reason the Venezuelan state suffers from the aforementioned deficit of territorial sovereignty. The monopoly on violence apparatus, including the National Armed Forces, fails to dismantle the organized crime empires that control large portions of the national territory with impunity, especially in rich mining enclaves and along border areas.

This entire situation leads to some practical considerations. First, State Building in the Venezuelan case is, at its core, an aspiration to defeat organized crime. Without achieving this, ungovernability would be the order of the day, even in a scenario of catalyzed political change. The second is that a potential democratic inauguration (the inauguration of Edmundo González on January 10, 2025) must necessarily lead to a strategic alliance with countries in the region (USA, Colombia, Brazil) to pool efforts in defeating organized crime and rescuing Venezuela's territorial sovereignty. And the third, no less important for political stability and the consolidation of democracy, is that prudent mechanisms for negotiation and transitional justice will have to be established to allow for accommodations in accordance with the Constitution and without impunity to ensure democratizing incentives and guarantees for individuals linked to organized crime who currently hold power in Venezuela.

-For you, then, what are the pillars of the reconstruction of the Venezuelan State?

In recent years, I have intellectually focused on, so to speak, an intersection between Law and Political Science: *Constitutional Law of democratization*. This is the study of the legal frameworks that, with constitutional rank, serve as a channel for successful

processes of political change and democratic consolidation. In this sense, what both history and comparative politics teach us about these processes is something we can call the five 'c's: change, Constitution, concord, center, and consensus..

Now, everything mentioned above must be addressed and considered with realism. A necessary precondition for the advent of the constitutional state is the democratizing political change. Only by defeating autocratic regimes do societies, under a kind of civic intuition, organize human coexistence around the Constitution, concord, center, and consensus. It is like a prodigy of the collective psychology of a people who aspire to overcome their autocratic traumas to live in justice under the previously described premises, and which, moreover, should commit generation after generation to make the permanence of democracy possible.

In the Venezuelan case, we can bring up as an example of the five "c" the spirit of the Puntofijo Pact, which allowed forty years of civil and democratic liberties, unfortunately lost with the rise to power of Hugo Chávez Frías. And, I have no doubt, this is what will emerge after the victory of Edmundo González Urrutia on July 28, 2024, and his effective inauguration as President of the Republic on January 10, 2025, at the Federal Legislative Palace.

–Imagine that the democratizing political change occurs and the other four "c" you have referred to appear on the Venezuelan horizon. What are the first concrete tasks for rebuilding the state and ensuring constitutional democracy?

You put me in the not-so-easy position of suddenly grounding the thesis of the 'c's into concrete tasks for the Venezuelan case. And I think that's fine because it gives a more practical direction

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to this interview, as we definitely need to rebuild the state and secure constitutional democracy. This reminds me –drawing a comparison, of course– of the famous Bayeux speech delivered by Charles De Gaulle after the end of World War II, where he referred to the ‘reappearance of the French State’ for national reconstruction.

–Do we need to talk about the reappearance of the Venezuelan State?

Exactly. In our case, it is about the reappearance of the Venezuelan State for national reconstruction. A state that serves the democratic freedom of the people who expressed their will for change in the primary election of October 22, 2023, and that reaffirmed their desire for political change in the presidential elections of July 28, 2024.

In this regard, I will refer to three specific tasks.

Although it may seem obvious, the first is that political actors must determine which constitutional text should guide Venezuelan democratization. In my opinion, it should be the Constitution of 1999, without reforms or amendments, and we should avoid the temptation of thinking about a Constituent Assembly to draft a new fundamental pact. Constitutional reforms or amendments should be postponed until democracy is fully consolidated, for future generations. And why the Constitution of 1999? For several reasons: (i) it has sufficient democratizing resources, (ii) entering into processes of constitutional mutation would waste the civic energy of the Venezuelan people on discussions and divisions that could move us away from the main goal of implementing a transitional government and consolidating democracy, (iii) this

Constitution is, at the same time, a pedagogical and historical memory that reminds us of what we Venezuelans have been capable of and what mistakes we must never repeat, and finally, because (iv) this fundamental text is a symbol that may better allow the integration or democratic purification of remnants of the chavista-madurista elites.

The second task is the constitutional integration of the National Armed Forces into the process of state reconstruction and democratic assurance. Notice that I use the adjective 'constitutional,' meaning that the functioning of the National Armed Forces must be in line with Article 328 of the Constitution. As I mentioned earlier, the Venezuelan state has a deficit of territorial sovereignty. This is due to the convergence of three factors in the territory of the Republic: organized crime, international terrorism, and interventionist figures from the world's autocracies (Russians, Iranians, Cubans, etc.). To rebuild the state and ensure democracy, these three factors must be removed from the national territory, which is only possible with the actions of a National Armed Forces that adhere to the Constitution and have the strategic and geopolitical cooperation –as I also mentioned before– of the United States of America, Brazil, and Colombia.

–Forgive me for interrupting you, but it seems to me that such a role for the National Armed Forces could entail militaristic risks...

You are right. That's why at this point, one more word must be said on the matter. The integration of the National Armed Forces into the democratization of Venezuela is a delicate intricacy, which will require a perfect balance: on one hand, the military must be part of sustaining the new order of freedoms; but on the

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other hand, they must be prevented from having new autocratic appetites that could compromise democracy. For this, the renewal of our military culture and education will be key.

–Continue, please. What is the third task in that State Building task?

The third task I want to refer to is the reinstitutionalization of the public powers that make up the State, that is, the re-legitimization of the national powers after January 10, 2025. For this, the role of the next Legislature of the National Assembly will be central. Once the constitutional assumption of office by Edmundo González Urrutia becomes possible, it will be crucial to promote early parliamentary elections, as soon as possible in 2025, so that the National Assembly genuinely represents the democratizing aspirations of the Venezuelan people and appoints the new magistrates of the Supreme Court of Justice, the rectors of the National Electoral Council, and the heads of the Citizen Power organs. This is about implementing once and for all the institutional arsenal of the 1999 Constitution, with the system of separation of powers it contains and under the logic of checks and balances, which has been absent in Venezuela since 1999.

–No other tasks to mention?

Of course. There will be other tasks to undertake that I will not dwell on at this moment, such as renewing the organs of state and municipal public power, strengthening the party system, implementing a social market economy model that reduces poverty and inequalities, and developing a so-called transformative justice system for managing historical memory

and national reconciliation, among others. I am optimistic about all of this.

–Finally, what guarantees can we Venezuelans give ourselves to ensure that the future institutions of the State and constitutional democracy endure over time?

Virtue. Civic virtue. Beyond norms and constitutional designs, the key lies in the firm determination of the elites and the citizenry to live in a democracy under a functional and capable State that respects human rights. This is what the German doctrine of Constitutional Law calls the ‘immanent guarantee,’ that is, the will and commitment of a people to live democratically within the limits established by the Constitution itself.

–But we are not German... what is realistic for Venezuela?

That is true. We are not Germans, nor do we want to be. But we will have to achieve our own local ‘immanent guarantee.’ In our case, the huge task of rebuilding the state is looming. And that has been the focus of this interview. However, there are also tasks ahead regarding the renewal of political culture and the healing of the anthropological damage caused by twenty-five years of autocracy in the soul of the Venezuelans. I am sure that the suffering accumulated over all these years will not be in vain and will transform into democratic capital projected throughout the coming decades...

# Innovation and Governance: Rethinking Public Administration in Venezuela

Deisy Hernández Sánchez

Theoretical-conceptual approach

## **Innovation in Public Administration**

Innovation in public administration refers to the intentional and effective application of new approaches, technologies, and processes to improve efficiency, transparency, citizen participation, and the quality of government services. This includes implementing cutting-edge and innovative solutions to improve public resource administration, enhance data-driven decision-making, foster collaboration between government agencies, and continuously seek more effective ways to meet the needs and demands of the people. Innovation in public administration is essential to modernize and strengthen governance, ensuring a more accountable and citizen-oriented government.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Juan Carlos Pomaquero Yuquilema, Jonathan Dennis Segura Márquez, Luis Eduardo Bonifaz Nieto, Geovanna Alexandra Robalino Romero. "Innovación en la gestión pública y open government". *Polo del Conocimiento*, Edición N° 85, Vol. 8, N° 9, pp. 1219-1233.

Complementing the definition, CLAD<sup>2</sup> highlights that innovation has an elastic character and is constantly evolving. In the case of public administration, it can be defined as the need for the Public Administration to anticipate and adapt to social changes and, in general, to any type of change that transforms the relationship between citizens and the Administration, ensuring that the Public Administration has the necessary and optimized mechanisms to meet the needs of citizens. From this definition, it can be inferred that the concept of innovation changes depending on the challenges of each specific time period. Innovation is a broad term that can refer to various aspects in public administration, whether technical, administrative, structural, or organizational, and its purpose is to propose solutions that improve current situations by providing better practices.

Windrum, cited by Ramírez,<sup>3</sup> notes that types of innovation in the public sector can be approached from the following perspectives: (a) innovation in services: the introduction of a new service or an improvement in the quality of an existing service; (b) innovation in service delivery: alterations or changes in the ways of providing public services; (c) administrative and organizational innovation: changes in organizational structures, management practices, and routines; (d) conceptual innovation: the development of new perspectives or approaches and the

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2 CLAD, “Carta Iberoamericana de Innovación en la Gestión Pública”, *Revista del CLAD Reforma y Democracia*, N° 78, noviembre 2020, pp. 237-265, ISSN 1315-2378.

3 Windrum, P., “Innovation and Entrepreneurship in Public Services”. In: Álvaro Ramírez Alujas, *Innovación en la Gestión Pública y Open Government (gobierno abierto): Una vieja nueva idea Buen Gobierno*, N° 9, julio-diciembre 2010, Fundación Mexicana de Estudios Políticos y Administrativos A.C., Ciudad de México.

questioning of existing assumptions; (e) innovation policy: changes in thinking or behavioral intentions; and (f) systemic innovation: new or improved ways of interacting with other organizations and sources of knowledge.

Similarly, Ramírez citing Mulgan and Albury,<sup>4</sup> provides another categorization referring to three possible levels of innovation in the public sector:

- a. Incremental innovation: these are innovations that involve minor changes to existing services or processes. They are essential for achieving improvements in the public sector because they foster small but lasting changes in service delivery, support adaptation to individual and local needs, and provide a better balance between quality and service delivery costs.
- b. Radical innovation: These are less common innovations that involve developing new services or introducing radically new ways of doing things in terms of organizational processes or service delivery to citizens. This type of innovation does not necessarily change the overall dynamics of the sector but represents significant improvements in productivity and the capacities that a public organization must develop to respond to the expectations of service users.

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4 Geoff Mulgan, David Albury, *Innovation in the public sector*. In: Álvaro Ramírez Alujas, *Innovación en la Gestión Pública y Open Government (gobierno abierto): Una vieja nueva idea Buen Gobierno*, N° 9, julio-diciembre 2010, Fundación Mexicana de Estudios Políticos y Administrativos A.C., Ciudad de México, p. 103.

- c. Systemic or transformational innovations: These tend to be rare and few in number because this type of innovation, often driven by new technologies, results in new workforce structures and new forms and types of organization, transforming entire industries and dramatically altering relationships—organizational relationships and overall performance. These innovations often take decades to fully materialize their effects because they require fundamental changes in the organizational, social, and cultural environment. Systemic innovation may also be driven by shifts in mindset, paradigms, or new policies.

It is important to mention the study conducted by Borins cited by Ramírez,<sup>5</sup> which identifies five patterns or “pillars” based on successful innovative projects and initiatives:

- Systemic approach: The importance of understanding and applying innovation by considering the interconnections with other organizations is emphasized, promoting coordination and integrated solutions focused on services.
- Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs): The catalytic role of ICTs in providing more effective public services is highlighted.

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5 Borins, Sandford, *Innovation as Narrative*. In Álvaro Ramírez Alujas, *Innovación en la Gestión Pública y Open Government (gobierno abierto): Una vieja nueva idea Buen Gobierno*, N° 9, julio-diciembre 2010, Fundación Mexicana de Estudios Políticos y Administrativos A.C., Ciudad de México.

- **Process Improvement:** The need for innovations that make public sector processes faster, more user-friendly, and accessible is mentioned.
- **Private Sector and Civil Society Participation:** This section emphasizes the importance of collaboration with the private sector, volunteer organizations, and civil society to achieve public goals through competition, partnerships, and active user participation.
- **Empowerment of Communities, Citizens, and Public Officials:** The consultation and participation of communities and citizens in the improvement of public services are emphasized, as well as the encouragement of public officials to take risks and drive innovative actions.

## **Governance in Public Administration**

As Conejero<sup>6</sup> points out, the word governance emerged with significant prominence in the 1980s, linked to international economic organizations, particularly those focused on promoting economic development, such as the World Bank. Since then, its usage has expanded to all international organizations and academic and intellectual spheres. Governance can be analyzed as a term that aims to go beyond politics and the public sphere, representing a new way of governing or a new way of steering a ship without centralized control. All of this merely reflects the lively academic debate surrounding this concept in the 1990s, which encompasses multiple meanings and diverse messages.

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6 Enrique Conejero Paz, *Globalización, gobernanza local y democracia participativa*. Universidad Miguel Hernández de Elche, 2005.

Similarly, it conveys the idea of overcoming the bureaucratic-hierarchical model of government in favor of a more decentralized, cooperative model that emphasizes the complementarity between the public sector, the private sector, and the organizations, groups, and individuals that make up civil society. Governance is a broader concept than government, as it incorporates the wide range of internal and external pressures that nation-states have faced over the past thirty years.

In any case, it must be emphasized that the concept of governance contains two fundamental elements: self-governance and interorganizational networks, conveying the following ideas:

1. *The interdependence between organizations.* Governance is a broader concept than government, incorporating non-state actors, blurring the line between the public and private sectors.
2. *The continuous interactions between members of the public policy network,* which occur due to the need to exchange resources and negotiate shared objectives.
3. *Interactions based on trust,* with negotiated and agreed-upon rules of the game among the multiple participants.
4. *A significant degree of state autonomy,* with self-organization being a hallmark. However, although the state may not occupy a central position in the network, it can foster and steer it in a different way.<sup>7</sup>

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7 Enrique Conejero Paz, *Globalización, gobernanza local y democracia participativa.* Universidad Miguel Hernández de Elche, 2005, p.21.

Each premise is articulated with the approach of Peters and Filgueiras,<sup>8</sup> who indicate that good governance requires the performance of governments according to global value standards, including effectiveness, equity, and impartiality. In the context of Latin America, governance reforms are used as tools to legitimize governments and gain political support from citizens. The authors tend to conclude that the concept of good governance is related to different governing practices through the adoption of global value standards, but its implementation and development vary depending on the region and its context. Latin America has gone through different waves that have led to the integration of market standards, the coordination of social actors in networks, and the reconstruction of the state's administrative apparatus, among other challenges. However, in the end, citizen participation has been key to driving the process of innovation in public administration and policies.

Governance promotes a relational state model centered on citizenship as the core of public policies.<sup>9</sup> It reflects the emergence and consolidation of a paradigm of government exercise based on the prominence of decision-making processes, where all involved actors take on new responsibilities to intervene interdependently in public affairs, acknowledging each participant's interests, resources, and capacities.

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8 B. Guy Peters, Fernando Filgueiras, "Introduction: Looking for Governance: Latin America Governance Reforms and Challenges", *International Journal of Public Administration*, 45:4, 299-307, DOI: 10.1080/01900692.2021.2020905

9 Enrique Conejero Paz, *Globalización, gobernanza local y democracia participativa*. Universidad Miguel Hernández de Elche, 2005.

Finally, it is essential to consider the foundational pillars of governance, where active social participation and political consensus are fundamental to strategic decision-making and conflict resolution within society. The responsibility of political actors to remain accountable to the public and ensure transparency in public policy administration is emphasized. Furthermore, the integration between the state and civil society to establish effective partnerships and foster a new governance model is highlighted. Advocacy for the rule of law is underlined, ensuring adherence to legal frameworks and respect for governmental policies through the modernization of state powers. Lastly, a clear regulatory framework is necessary to define the rules of the game between the state and the private sector, promoting business productivity and innovation in productive sectors.<sup>10</sup>

## Public Administration in Venezuela

Studies by Pérez,<sup>11</sup> Cejas,<sup>12</sup> and González<sup>13</sup> outline the historical context of Venezuela, which has undergone numerous political and economic changes that have directly impacted the public sector. Since the late President Hugo Chávez came to power

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10 Edgar Ortegón Quiñones, *Guía sobre diseño y gestión de la política pública*. Bogotá. Instituto Colombiano para el Desarrollo de la Ciencia y la Tecnología “Francisco José de Caldas”, Organización del Convenio Andrés Bello, Universidad de Alcalá – Instituto de Estudios Latinoamericanos, Serie Ciencia y Tecnología N° 168, 2008.

11 Pérez, J. “Transparencia y rendición de cuentas en el sector público venezolano”, *Revista de Administración Pública*, 25(3), 2021, pp. 78-94.

12 Cejas, D. “El legado de Chávez en la política latinoamericana”. *Revista de Estudios Latinoamericanos*, 15 (2), 2020, pp. 45-61.

13 González, M. “La crisis económica en Venezuela: causas y consecuencias”. *CEPAL Review*, 109, 2019, pp. 89-102.

in 1999, the country has experienced profound political and social polarization, affecting all state institutions. The implementation of economic and social policies rooted in 21st-century socialism has sparked controversy and deepened divisions within Venezuelan society.

The Venezuelan public sector is characterized by an economic crisis and hyperinflation that have weakened state institutions and deteriorated the population's quality of life. A lack of transparency persists, reflected in the difficulty of accessing public information. Corruption has further eroded trust in public institutions. There is also a structural component tied to institutional fragility, which manifests in a weak capacity to effectively implement public policies and the centralization of power, which concentrated authority in the national government, leading to the supremacy of the Executive branch over other branches of the state. Consequently, institutional checks and balances have been undermined, and the autonomy of the Legislative and Judicial branches has been curtailed.

The impact of this power concentration has been significant for Venezuela's public sector. On one hand, it has enabled the government to implement public policies swiftly and efficiently, particularly in sectors such as education, healthcare, and housing. On the other hand, it has fostered a political and social polarization climate, limiting space for democratic participation.

## **Reimagining Public Administration in Venezuela: Theory and Context**

Reimagining public administration in Venezuela requires redefining the state's role, strengthening democratic institutions, and fostering transparency and accountability in public administration. In this context, it is essential to engage civil society, political actors, and public policy experts in designing and implementing reforms aimed at improving the quality of life for Venezuelans.

From theory to context, the following categories can be identified:

**Innovation and Public Administration:** Implementing innovative strategies can enhance public governance's efficiency, transparency, and accountability. Additionally, there are opportunities to advance reforms that strengthen Venezuela's public sector. Key areas include the integration of information and communication technologies into public administration, the promotion of citizen participation, and the reinforcement of accountability mechanisms, all of which could significantly improve the efficiency and transparency of state institutions.

**Governance and Public Administration:** Good governance is vital for fostering an environment conducive to innovation in public administration in Venezuela. An effective and transparent government can build trust in public institutions and encourage citizen participation. It is crucial to prioritize political dialogue between the government and the opposition to reach consensus-based solutions to the country's challenges. Key measures include rebuilding state institutions, promoting citizen engagement, and implementing sustainable

development policies to improve Venezuelans' quality of life. According to Jiménez,<sup>14</sup> citing the World Bank, public-private partnerships are defined as agreements between the public and private sectors in which private entities provide part of the services or responsibilities traditionally managed by the public sector under a clear framework of shared goals for delivering public services or infrastructure. These partnerships must meet three conditions:

- 1) private sector participation in financing and managing projects,
- 2) effective risk transfer, and
- 3) long-term contractual relationships.

Governance aims to strengthen relationships between public and private actors, interest groups, organized civil society, and citizens to create synergies that facilitate better understanding and decision-making to address and resolve significant social issues that hinder the full exercise of human rights. In this context, public administration serves as the essential mechanism for implementing public policies, while governance provides the ideal framework for guiding improved public decision-making.

At the end of the day, innovation and governance are essential elements for reimagining public administration in Venezuela. Key actors must focus on identifying strategies that enable the country to adopt innovative practices and strengthen governance within its public administration. Integrating new technologies, citizen

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14 Adriana Jiménez, "Asociaciones público-privadas: una oportunidad de mejora para el sector público". *Debates IESA*. Volumen XXV, N° 3, Julio-septiembre, 2020.

participation, and promoting transparency are critical measures to strengthen state institutions and enhance the quality of life for Venezuelans. It is crucial to foster political dialogue and seek consensus to overcome the current crisis and lay the groundwork for a more prosperous and democratic future in Venezuela.

# From the Democratic Dream to the Shadow of Authoritarianism: The Political Crisis in the Southern Continent<sup>1</sup>

Sebastián Horesok

*“One day it will be true. Progress will reach the plains,  
and barbarism will retreat, defeated.”*

Rómulo Gallegos

Weapons, demagoguery, and populism have been the major obstacles to achieving freedom, order, and development in Latin America. This essay explores the causes of authoritarianism in the region and provides tools for political parties to promote democratic stability and freedom in the region.

The political history of Latin America has been marked by events that have caused instability within the political systems of the region's countries. Tracing a timeline from independence to the present makes it evident how these systems have oscillated cyclically between different regimes. When one of these nations establishes a civilian government without strengthening its

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1 n.d. Dialogo político. Accessed June 7, 2024. <https://dialogopolitico.org/elecciones/el-fantasma-del-autoritarismo-electoral/>

institutions and stabilizing the system's actors, it often opens the door to caudillo-style, militaristic governments that, through arms and terror, eventually consolidate into tyrannies. This seemingly endless cycle has inflicted deep wounds on Latin American societies, wounds that continue to resonate in their political life today.

Latin American nations define themselves as democracies. However, it is well known that democracy in the region is in constant flux. One of the primary factors behind this democratic instability lies in the independence processes. These processes were profoundly influenced by a caudillista character and a significant rejection of civility. During the independence era, the power of arms outweighed the importance of laws or the will of the citizens.

Fearing the wars and anarchy that plagued the continent post-independence, Latin American society harbored a strong desire for order, often without foreseeing the long-term consequences. According to Professor Graciela Soriano,<sup>2</sup> Latin America's autocratic phenomenon shares many similarities with the tyrannical processes of ancient Greece. There, illegal governments built their support on the "populace," a concept that differs from "people" or "citizenship." "Populace" refers to a group manipulated demagogically by tyrannical elites, using political rhetoric as their tool. In such regimes, it was believed that governance practices offered solutions during times of crisis.

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2 Graciela Soriano de García-Pelayo, *El personalismo político hispanoamericano del siglo XIX: criterios y proposiciones metodológicas para su estudio*. N.p.: Monte Avila Editores Latinoamericana, 1993..

Every decision was justified under the pretext of imposing order on the existing anarchy within the Greek cities.

But what do the distant Greek *poleis* have to do with our Latin American societies? Their similarities are grounded in the long-term outcomes of such governments. While these regimes provided some measure of stability to the cities in the short term, their practices eventually devolved into abuses of rights and freedoms for the inhabitants of the *polis*. The constant abuse of power bred greater instability and dissatisfaction over time. In turn, this discontent led to the rise of new tyrants who, through violent conspiracies, sought to overthrow the current government. Ultimately, this process resulted in even greater conflict and a vicious cycle that gradually eroded the foundation of Hellenic civilization.

A similar phenomenon has occurred in the region. In the 19th century, whenever a Latin American government made decisions that did not align with the interests of a particular caudillo, these leaders would deploy their personal armies to seize power, fostering a climate of instability. The justification for their actions lay in the premise that they, with an iron hand, could solve the crisis through military force.

It is worth asking: how did these caudillos amass so much power? One of the fundamental reasons lies in the weakness of the State. This framework was composed of fragile and overly centralized institutions. Furthermore, the rulers, operating from their offices, lacked a tangible presence throughout the national territory. A clear example of this can be seen in Venezuela. Despite its long-standing militarist tradition, for much of the 19th century, the country did not have a functioning army capable of fulfilling

the essential roles of modern states: ensuring the security and defense of citizens and territory.

For some historians, such as Germán Carrera Damas,<sup>3</sup> the first formal process of institutionalizing the Venezuelan army occurred during Antonio Guzmán Blanco's initial presidency (1870–1877). However, the reach of this army's operations extended from the capital to the city of Valencia, a distance of just 168 kilometers. This covered less than 10% of the national territory, leaving internal order reliant on pacts between regional caudillos and their private militias, or *montoneras*, and the weak central government.

It is not until the 20th century that caudillismo with these characteristics comes to an end. In 1899, the Restorative Liberal Revolution triumphed. This movement, led by Cipriano Castro and Juan Vicente Gómez, ushered in significant modernization of the Venezuelan army. The initial steps were taken during Castro's presidency, but it was General Juan Vicente Gómez who ultimately solidified the Prussian military model within the Venezuelan Armed Forces. This detail is far from insignificant. The Prussian military model not only shaped Europe's political future through two world wars but also profoundly influenced the political landscape of Latin America. The behavior of Latin American militaries throughout the 20th century is a clear reflection of this model.

Ultimately, it can be said that in the 19th century, there was a clear dichotomy between civilians and caudillos. This dichotomy was based on the following premises: civilian rule equated to

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3 Germán Carrera Damas, *Una nación llamada Venezuela*. N.p.: Editorial Alfa, 2017.

anarchy, while caudillismo equated to order. However, this came at a significant cost: under neither form of governance were there freedom, development, or political stability.

The 20th century, however, brought new political actors, particularly on the international stage. Among the most significant was the emergence of the Monroe Doctrine;<sup>4</sup> a policy that justified U.S. intervention in Latin America to defend its interests across the continent. This intervention took various forms, the most common being the exertion of influence over political systems to ensure governments aligned with U.S. interests. One area that saw considerable involvement was the armed forces of Latin American countries. The United States invested heavily in its modernization, with one of the most notable examples being the establishment of the School of the Americas. This program focused on training in counterinsurgency and guerrilla warfare, the latter emerging as a new form of conflict that would define much of Latin America's 20th-century political landscape.

It is worth analyzing why, despite efforts to strengthen internal order and Latin American institutions, instability continues to prevail. The first point to highlight is that these efforts were not entirely successful. While the Armed Forces were better trained and institutionalized, democratic culture and other institutions were not strong enough. The second factor to consider is the emergence, in the 20th century, of another significant actor that remains highly relevant: communism and its various ideological mutations.

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4 See *“Qué fue la Doctrina Monroe creada por EE.UU. hace 200 años para «proteger» al continente americano y que acabó convirtiendo a Latinoamérica en el «patio trasero» de Washington”*, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articulos/c3g23990xn7o>

Communist ideas arrived in Latin America at the end of the 19th century, accessible only to intellectual elites who were literate. The popular sectors, such as peasants and laborers, did not have access to these ideas for two fundamental reasons: the high levels of illiteracy and the disdain shown toward them by the elites. This scenario changed significantly with the emergence of a political phenomenon that would divide Latin American history into two eras: the 26th of July Movement. This revolutionary movement, led by Fidel Castro, Raúl Castro<sup>5</sup> and later Ernesto “Che” Guevara, was a Radical Left insurgency that sparked a new wave of armed conflict across Latin America.

It is important to explore the reasons why these guerrilla movements flourished. Litsep<sup>6</sup> argues in his thesis that a country's economic growth is sufficient to ensure political stability. However, reality shows that other factors must also be considered. At that time, a nation's economic growth and proximity to the United States did not necessarily translate into social improvements. On the contrary, highly exclusionary systems with significant levels of social inequality were often created.

In the Venezuelan case, a clear example of this can be observed in the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez. This authoritarian government, backed by the United States, sought to guarantee political stability through the so-called “Concrete Revolution” and extravagant infrastructure projects. In reality, Pérez Jiménez was fostering a state of vulnerability and social exclusion for millions

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5 Gabriel González, “1953: el asalto al cuartel Moncada al que Fidel llegó tarde -DW- 26/07/2023”, DW. <https://www.dw.com/es/1953-el-asalto-al-cuartel-moncada-al-que-fidel-lleg%C3%B3-tarde/g-66352927>

6 Roberto García Jurado, *Teoría de la democracia en Estados Unidos: Almond, Lipset, Dahl, Huntington y Rawls*, La. N.p.: Siglo XXI, 2009.

of Venezuelans, who began to sympathize with the so-called “*Barbudos de Sierra Maestra*.”<sup>7</sup>

Globally, this process was not isolated from the context of the Cold War, a conflict between the two great world powers of the time. Rather than a purely military confrontation, it was a clash of the major ideologies of the 20th century: capitalism versus socialism or communism. This context led the Monroe Doctrine to adopt a new mission: “the Western cause.” According to Linz in *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*,<sup>8</sup> the so-called “Western cause” dictated that socialism must be prevented from taking root in Latin America at all costs, even if the actions taken caused setbacks to democracy.

In this scenario, the fragile democracies of Latin America began to collapse. The region experienced a political regression, this time with different characteristics from those of the 19th century, but where two competing approaches to wielding power clashed. On one side were the military dictatorships, heavily influenced by right-wing ideology, and on the other were leftist revolutions, pursuing what Professor José Manuel Azcona<sup>9</sup> has called “the dream of social revolution.”

The influence of the left permeated the entire region. In countries like Chile, the Marxist policies of Salvador Allende

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7 Jerónimo Ríos Sierra, y José M. Azcona Pastor, eds. *Historia de las guerrillas en América Latina*. N.p.: Catarata, 2019.

8 Juan J. Linz, *La quiebra de las democracias*. N.p.: Alianza, 2021.

9 José M. Azcona Pastor, Majlinda Abdiu, eds. *El sueño de la revolución social: contracultura, canción-protesta y Kalashnikov*. N.p.: Editorial Comares, 2020..

polarized society to the point of a potential civil war.<sup>10</sup> The outcome of this process was the consolidation of one of the strongest dictatorships in Latin American history. On the other hand, in Nicaragua, the Somoza dictatorship led to the rise of the Sandinista guerrilla, initiating a new authoritarian process, but with a left-wing orientation. Similarly, Argentina experienced years of terror, disappearances, and abuse of power during the National Reorganization Process, leaving a deep wound in society that persists to this day. Ultimately, it is clear how the Cold War shaped the behavior of Latin American political systems, polarizing countries between extreme ideologies.

Only Venezuela achieved significant democratic stability in the 20th century and managed to overcome the ideological and polarizing debate through a system of pacts<sup>11</sup> that prioritized democracy not as a means but as an end to achieve political stability. It is important to emphasize the role that political parties played in this process. These structures, which by definition are the link between the needs of society and the state, were the main guarantors of democracy in Venezuela.

Latin American politics continues to evolve. After the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, all of humanity believed that what Francis Fukuyama described in “The End of

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10 “Allende: los 191 días que terminaron en un golpe de Estado que aún divide a Chile”. *BBC*. 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articulos/cq599zrgkrvo>

11 Manuel Caballero, *Pacto de Punto Fijo*, BiblioFEP, Fundación Empresas Polar, n.d. Consultado el 5 de junio de 2024. <https://bibliofep.fundacionempresaspoler.org/dhv/entradas/p/pacto-de-punto-fijo/>.

History”<sup>12</sup> had been reached. In this work, the author argued that, after the fall of the Iron Curtain of communism, the greatest consolidation of liberal democracy to date would occur. However, history has shown us that this was not the case. After a wave of democratization around the world and the continent, the old remnants of the Cold War began to play a fundamental role and ended up exploiting the flaws in the democratic system worldwide.

The new weapon driving this regression is populism.<sup>13</sup> Populism can be defined as a political tool that transcends ideologies, appealing to emotions to achieve its sole objective: gaining power through the masses. To accomplish this, populism employs elements such as polarization, the indiscriminate use of emotions, and a zero-sum approach to relationships within the political system. These processes are always spearheaded by a charismatic leader with messianic traits, offering magical solutions to the most complex issues of democratic systems, such as corruption, poverty, and security.

Antipolitics becomes the main rhetorical element of these populist movements, often expressed through slogans like “Out with them all!”<sup>14</sup> o “Here I stand firm. Send me the people, and I

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12 Francis Fukuyama, *El Fin de la Historia y el Ultimo Hombre*. N.p., Planeta-De Agostini, 1993.

13 Jan-Werner. Müller, *¿Qué es el populismo?*, traducción de Clara Stern Rodríguez. N.p., Grano de sal, 2017.

14 Eduardo Duhalde, Néstor Kirchner. “20 años del “Corralito”: 3 cosas que cambiaron en Argentina tras la grave crisis económica, política y social de 2001”. *BBC*, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-59494504>.

will obey. I am a soldier of the people; you are my boss.”<sup>15</sup> These statements reflect a narrative aiming to dismantle the relationship between political parties and citizens, replacing it with a paternalistic or messianic bond.

Another example of this rhetoric can be seen when President Chávez compared himself to Simón Bolívar or, on occasion, to Jesus Christ, while labeling his opponents as Pharisees, Judases, *escuálidos* (weaklings), or *majunches* (mediocre). The ultimate goal of such discourse is to polarize society into “good” and “bad” factions, thereby justifying reforms within the state and paving the way for a broader transformation: the so-called Revolution. Revolutionary rhetoric seeks to convince people that it is the only force capable of resolving their problems and bringing order to the “disaster” supposedly caused by democracy and its parties.

Unlike the 20th century, where regime ruptures were violent, driven by the military’s boots or the guerrilla’s rifle, as Ernesto Guevara<sup>16</sup>, the revolutionary transformation of 21st-century populism operates from within, leveraging popular support as its primary mechanism. This process unfolds through the dismantling of institutions, achieved via constitutional reforms, frequent plebiscites, or the centralization of power within the executive branch. Political freedoms are gradually curtailed, freedom of expression is attacked, and electoral districts are often manipulated to make elections increasingly uncompetitive. Furthermore, these governments frequently use state resources

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15 “Las frases que inmortalizaron a Hugo Chávez”. *TeleSUR*, 2016. <https://www.telesurtv.net/news/Las-frases-que-inmortalizaron-a-Hugo-Chavez-20160305-0013.html>.

16 Jerónimo Ríos Sierra, y José M. Azcona Pastor, eds. *Historia...*

indiscriminately to benefit the ruling party, aiming to exert greater social control over the population. The consequences of such actions range from the consolidation of a paternalistic state and a dependent citizenry to an excessive increase in public spending and various economic distortions.

At the discursive level, the relationships between political actors within the system are framed in a friend-versus-enemy perspective: if you are not with the process, you are against it. Under this paradigm, the first targets are typically the media and political parties. These two entities represent dissenting voices prioritizing the defense of truth and democracy above all else.

What is peculiar about the phenomenon of authoritarianism in Latin America is that the affinity among these regimes is not ideological, despite their attempts to conceal this in their narratives. A clear example is their shared international alliances that can be considered adversaries of the West, democracy, and freedom. These include Putin's Russia, the Ayatollahs' theocracy in Iran, Erdogan's Turkey, and Xi Jinping's China. All of these authoritarian and totalitarian regimes exert influence in the region with the aim of undermining the Western democratic model.

Indeed, relationships such as those between China and El Salvador or Russia and Venezuela are not based on ideology but on power dynamics. In the region, Bukele criticizes Maduro, yet his commercial partner remains the same, indicating that his ultimate interests are unaffected. Bukele does not demonstrate a commitment to supporting democracy in the region. This aligns

with historian Antony Beevor's<sup>17</sup> assertion that the Third World War will not be fought over ideologies but will instead be a battle between democracy and authoritarianism.

Today, the battlefield is quietly set in the Americas, where antipolitics and populism serve as the panzers and stukas of authoritarianism. Political parties must take on the role of the bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki: becoming moral and ethical beacons of diligence for citizens, standing in resistance, and working together despite differences.

It is the duty of democrats to explore ways to combat authoritarianism. First and foremost, it is essential to cultivate truth, democracy, and, above all, freedom. Defending truth means defeating the dictatorship of relativism, which empowers populists through polarization and vindictiveness.

Secondly, liberal democracy must be promoted as the best form of government to achieve prosperity. Populist movements undermine freedoms and aim to create the perception that democratic systems cannot deliver societal well-being. Evidence suggests the complete opposite. Governments like those of José María Aznar in Spain or Konrad Adenauer in Germany provided substantial economic stability alongside robust political freedoms. For instance, Aznar's administration set a precedent for democratic security, overcoming a significant challenge of the 21st century: ETA terrorism. From a democracy, this was achieved through the strengthening of public order institutions. For many politicians,

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17 Laura Ventura, "Antony Beevor: "Las guerras del futuro serán entre la democracia y la autocracia". *La Nación*, 2022. <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/ideas/antony-beevor-las-guerras-del-futuro-seran-entre-la-democracia-y-la-autocracia-nid22102022/>.

liberty is not a cornerstone of their agendas. Someone who is free to develop their potential to the fullest, equipped with knowledge, and committed to their dignity becomes a critical thinker who would not follow a populist blindly but rather would challenge them and hold them accountable.

Latin American political parties must adopt stances similar to Spain's Partido Popular: defending democracy without yielding to the pressures of extremist factions. Parties must prioritize citizens in their political discourse and actions, ensuring economic freedom and safeguarding democracy, starting with society's primary political institution –the family. Now is the time to combat populism by reclaiming the political agenda, placing the human person at its core, and restoring dignity to individuals, thus ensuring the realization of the common good.

The centrist parties in Latin America must regain a prominent role among the people, redefining democracy as an end in itself, where justice becomes a virtue that permeates the entire political system. As Dr. Rafael Caldera once said:<sup>18</sup>

“It is difficult to ask the people to sacrifice themselves for freedom and democracy when they believe that freedom and democracy are incapable of providing them with food or preventing the exorbitant rise in the cost of living, when they have not been able to put a definitive stop to the terrible scourge of corruption, which, to the eyes of

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18 “Discurso de Rafael Caldera - Golpe 4 Febrero 1992”. n.d. *Retóricas*. Consultado el 5 de junio de 2024. [https://www.retoricas.com/2010/05/discurso-rafael-caldera-golpe-4-febrero.html#google\\_vignette](https://www.retoricas.com/2010/05/discurso-rafael-caldera-golpe-4-febrero.html#google_vignette)

everyone, is consuming institutionality every day. This situation cannot be hidden.”

Political parties must restore the meaning of the words “democracy” and “freedom,” transforming them from mere abstract concepts into guarantees of order and development for all Latin American countries.

Giovanni Sartori,<sup>19</sup> the Italian political scientist, warned that one of the great distortions of democracy was the belief that democracy could only be guaranteed through voting. The great populists know how to take advantage of this to deepen their authoritarian models. To defeat authoritarianism, we must continue fighting from what Sartori calls Demo-Power, that is, electoral struggles, and strengthen Demo-Control, which refers to the institutions responsible for keeping the democratic system afloat. The task of political organizations must be to make these concepts accessible and practical.

Today, the shadow of authoritarianism seems to be consolidating in Latin America. Only political parties, along with the citizenry, can stop it. The challenge is to regain the focus of politics: service. The caudillo, the military, and the guerrilla have already been defeated, and if the battle is fought with truth, hard work, and justice, populist authoritarianism will also be defeated.

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19 Rafael Arraiz Lucca, “Giovanni Sartori y el concepto de Democracia”, *Proyecto Base*, 2018. <https://www.proyectobase.org/giovanni-sartori-y-el-concepto-de-democracia/>.

# Venezuela and the Century of Democracy

Jesús Piñero

This essay was adapted from a masterclass titled *Venezuela no século XX: da busca à consolidação da democracia*, given to History students at the State University of Rio de Janeiro on August 16, 2023. It was expanded and adapted for this publication

These days, it is common to hear that democracy has been an exception in our history. It is an opinion often based on an argument that, while significant and with consequences we still experience today, is not the only lens through which we can interpret the past. We are referring to the idea that *caudillismo* and *militarism* have been specters haunting us, at the very least, since the founding of the republic. This perspective is certainly valid but not irrefutable, for if we approach history through a periodization centered on power, we will certainly see the dominance of the armed sector over the civilian. However, if we look instead at society as a whole, we will find something different: a mobilized citizenry in pursuit of and fighting for its rights.

Since political independence was declared in July 1811, Venezuelans have experienced democracy in various forms—an unrelenting pursuit that has spanned over two centuries and continues to this day. The 19th century, defined by historians as the century of war, is not, in our view, a period marked exclusively by

caudillos. It also represents an effort to build a republic grounded in civility, shaped by the prevailing ideas of the time: liberalism and federalism. The 20th century, on the other hand, served as the stage for transforming that fragile republic into a democratic one, though at times it has not been fully appreciated. It is for this reason that we have decided to write these lines.

## **The Unquestionable Republic**

Simón Bolívar's inert body had barely cooled down when differences over the new republic, founded in 1830, emerge. Páez's popularity among Venezuelans lasts for about a decade. The transition from monarchy to republic results in little more than 70 years of conflict. The monarchist mindset is not destroyed with the snap of a finger. Civil wars, caudillos, and revolutions are the variables of a Venezuela's moving toward independent political development after a costly war that lasted two decades. This is not an exceptional case, as it is common throughout the region, from Río Grande to Patagonia. It is no coincidence that historian Manuel Caballero describes this period with two words: war and liberalism.

Three surnames resonate in the string of names from that period: Páez, Monagas, and Guzmán. These are three men with the same common goal (to make Venezuela a modern liberal republic) but with different ideas (and, above all, methods) when it comes to putting them into practice. Hence, the republic wavers in its early years, but its concept does not succumb to the clashes. None of them, for example, proposed a return to the state that existed before 1811. The monarchist consciousness of Venezuelans does persist in society, as historian Germán Carrera Damas states, but it is increasingly weak and fragile, and Venezuelans make

an effort to make this clear (as Inés Quintero puts it). While the revolution abolished titles and privileges, it is up to its descendants to guarantee their rights.

The Treaty of Coche, the Decree of Guarantees, and the Decree on Public Instruction are the best evidence of this. The first brought the factions of the Federal War to the negotiating table, reaching an agreement without resorting to arms. The second guaranteed fundamental rights (some of which are still fought for worldwide) in the aftermath of the carnage of the civil war. The third established Venezuelan public schools under the premise that only educated nations could reach the pinnacle of civilization. While these ideals may seem obvious today (and, in form, even outdated), the point is that these three documents –along with many others, such as constitutions– reveal something crucial: in the 19th century, it was possible to conceive and craft a civil republic.

Far from being merely a period of devastating civil wars (more than a hundred, as counted by Manuel Caballero), the 19th century could be considered the century of republican construction. This is evidenced by political centralization and the end of *caudillismo* as a historical phenomenon, achieved through the actions of Cipriano Castro and Juan Vicente Gómez. The creation of the National Army redefined Venezuela as a modern state (at least according to Max Weber), and the reorganization of public finances under Román Cárdenas consolidated the state. Needless to say, oil played a transformative role during these years, positioning the country on the international stage with recognition of its territory, resources, and position. In this light, the Andeans can be seen as just the tip of the iceberg.

Thus, by the time Venezuela entered the 20th century, the existence of a republic was no longer subject to question. The political efforts of the 19th century seemed to have borne fruit after nearly a century of armed conflicts. Building a republican state in opposition to the monarchical order that had prevailed in the country until the early 1800s was the central goal of the governments of that century –a purpose pursued through various means, with war being the principal, though not the only, one, as evidenced by the examples previously mentioned. The same cannot be said for democracy, a concept that had been present since 1811 but now remained an unfinished task for the political endeavors of the 20th century.

### Through Trials and Errors

When the first edition of the article *El gendarme necesario* appeared in 1911, authored by Laureano Vallenilla Lanz, Juan Vicente Gómez had been in power for three years. While no one questioned the existence of a republic, albeit a fragile one, democracy had become society's unfulfilled promise. And it would remain so for a long time, though this was unknowable to the Venezuelans of the time, whom the regime's propagandists sought to educate—among them, of course, is the author of *Cesarismo democrático*, a book published in 1919. On this subject, historian Tomás Straka writes: “Vallenilla Lanz’s fundamental thesis is that, due to Venezuela’s geographical conditions, the caudillo –that is, a Caesar elevated to power by the will of the people (...) is its natural form of government.”<sup>1</sup>

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1 Tomás Straka, “Cesarismo democrático: la victoriosa derrota Vallenilla Lanz”, 4 de noviembre de 2019, en *Prodavinci*, consultado el 17 de abril de 2024. <https://prodavinci.com/cesarismo-democratico-la-victoriosa-derrota-de-vallenilla-lanz/> .

The idea was not exclusive to the *gomecismo*. The governments that followed the dictator's death continued to rely on it, albeit with less vigor than in his time. This explains the reluctance of Eleazar López Contreras and Isaías Medina Angarita to fully extend political guarantees to society, reserving them only for the most "qualified": literate men over the age of 21. While far from what we might today consider democracy, this approach was justified in the name of civilization, as professed by the positivist educators of the 19th century and interpreted by Gómez's adherents. As historian Elías Pino Iturrieta notes, they "(...) devised the first systematic attempt at legitimizing a government in Venezuela through the application of a coherent and uniform theory."<sup>2</sup>

Although it continues to exist in the realm of ideas, like a ghost refusing to fade away, the notion of the democratic Caesar collapses in practice with the events of October 18, 1945, which definitively put an end to the remnants of *gomecismo*. The strongman, the "necessary gendarme," is no longer seen as the figure responsible for guiding society to the pinnacle of civilization. Instead, the new leaders believe that everyone is capable of doing so. This sentiment is captured by Rómulo Betancourt on October 30 of the same year, just 12 days after the overthrow of Medina Angarita and the formation of the Revolutionary Government Junta, which quickly calls for the election of a Constituent Assembly: "This revolution has been carried out to return sovereignty to the people."<sup>3</sup>

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2 Elías Pino Iturrieta, *Positivismo y gomecismo*, Caracas, Alfa, 2016, p. 76.

3 Rómulo Betancourt, "Motivos y objetivos de la Revolución de Octubre", in: Jesús Piñero, *Venezuela: documentos para su estudio (1498-1999)*, Caracas, Luis Felipe Capriles Editor, 2021, p. 217.

However, the vices they had promised to combat soon emerged in the new government and that of Rómulo Gallegos –the first president elected by popular vote. As a result, this democratic project was effectively overseen by a single political party, Acción Democrática. For the military officers involved in the events of October 18, this dominance had plunged the country into anarchy, making the presence of an institution to restore order essential. That institution, of course, was the Armed Forces, which seized power on November 24, 1948, claiming to guarantee “(...) a constitutional order appropriate to Venezuela’s true reality and arising from the national will, freely and impartially expressed through political organizations,”<sup>4</sup> as they declared just hours after taking control.

In retrospect, examining these events from the present, we can assert that throughout the first half of the 20th century, there were at least three paths taken by the governments of the time in their pursuit of democracy: the first, under the premise of the strongman; the second, guided by a political party as the process’s driving force; and the third, rooted in institutional authority stemming from the Armed Forces. All three had their chance to be implemented, and all three failed spectacularly in their attempts. It would take until the second half of the century to uncover the keys to ensuring a lasting democratic republic. The pivotal moment in that process came on October 31, 1958, with the signing of a political agreement.

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4 “Exposición de las Fuerzas Armadas Nacionales (Comunicado N° 6)”, Caracas, 24 de noviembre de 1948, en: Eduardo Mayobre, *Venezuela 1948-1958. La dictadura militar*, Caracas, Fundación Rómulo Betancourt, 2013, pp. 79-80.

## Consolidation... and Crisis?

The signing of the Puntofijo Pact not only represented a partisan agreement among the three most popular political groups with liberal democratic visions but also reflected a much broader consensus that spanned various sectors of the elites and society. This event signified the commitment of business leaders, workers and unions, the Church, students, and even the military to democracy. This commitment represented a significant milestone for the country, as for the first time in many years –perhaps since the Treaty of Coche in the 19th century– Venezuelans decided to come to an understanding without tearing each other apart and succeeded in doing so. While the country had not lacked attempts to resolve conflicts peacefully, this time, they triumphed.

The democratic project that began in 1958 did not, however, cease to have enemies or detractors. On the contrary, democracy allows for all voices, even those that seek to destroy it. The examples are abundant: the first decade of the agreement between the political parties was very turbulent –a period of coups attempting to destabilize the state, but ultimately ending in failure. Although these movements came from two fronts, characteristic of Cold War extremism, the antidemocratic actions do not have any political color. As historian Edgardo Mondolfi Gudat explains in his book *Temporada de golpes*, where he carefully examines the historiography of these uprisings: “(...) as if, in a mosaic fashion, it were possible to separate the waters between the military leaders of the various revolts.”<sup>5</sup>

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5 Edgardo Mondolfi Gudat, *Temporada de golpes*, Caracas, Alfa, p. 21.

This did not mean that democracy was immune to attacks or emerged unscathed from its problems. This is why historian Rafael Arráiz Lucca asserts that, by the end of the first 15 years of democratic experience, the problems began.<sup>6</sup> Not because they hadn't existed before, but because they continue to persist to this day. As the 1970s progressed, the leaders and critics of the project quickly diagnosed the symptoms, and by the early 1980s, they were already proposing solutions: democracy needed to be expanded, and decentralization was the cure for this illness. The creation of the Presidential Commission for State Reform (Copre) pointed to the discomfort, but it wasn't enough: devaluation and political corruption caused severe damage.

However, these years cannot be compared to those that would follow starting in 1989. The social eruption of February 27 and the state's response to those events contributed to the narrative of democracy's enemies. So much so that, despite appearing more stable at the start of the 1990s, two attempted coups in 1992 ultimately eroded the public's trust. Nevertheless, neither the Caracazo, nor the military uprisings, nor the conspiracies were able to undermine the republic and democracy. In the end, the president's departure was decided by him following a ruling by the Supreme Court and an investigation by Congress. The institutionalization once dreamed of at the beginning of the 20th century had already become a reality, liberal democracy had been consolidated, and it was not in crisis as had been suggested.

And who were the ones voicing these criticisms? The general public. The end of the century coincided with the end of an era.

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6 Rafael Arráiz Lucca, *La democracia en Venezuela, un proyecto inconcluso*, Caracas, Alfa, 2020 pp. 157-164

Despite the ambidextrous efforts of President Carlos Andrés Pérez's enemies,<sup>7</sup> a few dared to say that it was not democracy that was in crisis, but the institutions, particularly the political parties.<sup>8</sup> A fact that supports this idea is not only Pérez's constitutional departure in 1993, but also the election of an outsider: Hugo Chávez, the man who had attempted to seize the government by force in 1992, but who won the 1998 election without obstacles, under the democratic norms that were not hijacked by two parties, as some –Chávez included– had claimed. There were, therefore, clear electoral guarantees for the alternation of power.

## Final Remarks

Having completed this chronological outline and looking back at the examples discussed, we can say that the 20th century was the century of democracy. The political projects presented during this century share the common goal of pursuing a liberal democratic regime, despite their differing concepts and practices: the caudillo, the party, and the institutionalized military. This is not even considering the expansion of rights that Venezuelan society achieved, outside of presidentialism, such as the inclusion of women, urbanization, corporate and community associations, mass education, and social inclusion.<sup>9</sup> All of that in just 100 years. It was far from being a lost century, as a retired lieutenant colonel once claimed.

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7 We speak of an ambidextrous effort because the president's enemies came from both the left and the right

8 Manuel Caballero, *Las crisis de la Venezuela contemporánea*, Caracas, Alfadil, 2009, pp. 181.

9 Sobre estos temas sugerimos ver: Inés Quintero (coord.). *La sociedad en el siglo XX venezolano*. Caracas, Fundación para la Cultura Urbana, 2021..

# Power Structure and Political Change in Authoritarian Regimes: On What Foundations Should a Strategy for Venezuela Be Built?

Jorge Lazo Cividanes

*Domination is in a fact a general structure of power.*

Michel Foucault

When seeking to generate political change, the objective is to alter a prior balance of power, which is always transient. This involves eroding the foundations of the power structure that sustains it. In exploring effective strategies and opportunities for change in authoritarian regimes such as Venezuela, the factors and dynamics that influence their stability must be considered. This text aims to foster a discussion on these topics as part of the effort to guide the country toward a democratic transition.

To begin, it is important to highlight a common mistake that hampers the analysis of political change: the confusion between the concepts of regime and government. We then examine how power is dynamically established in various spaces through the

interaction between social structures and the actions of individuals and groups. Based on this, we reflect on ways to modify the balance of power in authoritarian regimes. Finally, we analyze how the interaction between legitimacy, authority, coercion, and obedience can create dynamics that lead to the fracture of such regimes, an essential condition for change.

## **Regime, Not Government**

When we speak of a political regime, we refer to the set of institutions, norms, and values that regulate and structure the exercise of power within a society. This includes how decisions are made, public policies are implemented, and conflicts between various political actors are resolved. There are numerous criteria for classifying regimes: how power is distributed and exercised, the institutions and practices that regulate access to and use of power, the type of elections, and the level of citizen participation, among others. Similarly, both democracies and authoritarian regimes are divided into distinct subtypes, each with its own particularities that do not determine but do influence the continuity and change of the regime.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, a government is composed of individuals who hold temporary roles in the administration of the state, lead institutions within the executive branch, and are responsible for designing and implementing public policies. From a methodological standpoint, these are units of analysis that are

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1 A typification of Nicolás Maduro's regime and its implications for a democratic transition can be found at: Jorge Lazo Cividanes, *Venezuela: repensar la estrategia para hacer la transición posible*. *Estrategia y poder*, 29 octubre 2017. <https://jorgelazocividanes.wordpress.com/2017/11/29/venezuela-estrategia-para-hacer-la-transicion-posible/>

closely related but not equivalent. Consequently, government and political regime represent distinct entities.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to highlighting that treating both terms as equivalents is unsuitable, the significance of this distinction lies in the fact that the concept of government is insufficient for thoroughly analyzing the processes of change and continuity in authoritarian regimes as it excludes elements and dynamics that transcend its conceptual boundaries and are essential for understanding the transition from one political regime to another. Moreover, pointing out this error is useful for countering both terms' interchangeable and manipulative use for concealed political purposes. A change of government within an authoritarian regime does not, of course, signify a transition to democracy. Consequently, the constant use of "government change" instead of "regime change" could lead to the erroneous assumption that the latter can be achieved through the traditional electoral competition methods inherent to democracy, which is both false and contradictory.

## **Structuring and Deconstructing Power**

Power is not located in a specific physical place, nor is it a material substance that can be "owned." Instead, it manifests through the interaction between individual or group actions (agency) and the overall institutional configuration (structure). In this interaction, practices and social structures mutually influence

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2 Scott Mainwaring; Guillermo O'Donnell; and J. Samuel Valenzuela, eds., *Issues in Democratic Consolidation: The New South American Democracies in Comparative Perspective*. University of Notre Dame Press, 1992. Gerardo Munck, "Disaggregating Political Regime. Conceptual Issues in the Study of Democratization". *Working Paper N° 228*, Kellogg Institute, University of Notre Dame, 1996..

one another. In other words, practices shape and are simultaneously shaped by social structures.<sup>3</sup> Through processes characterized by cooperation, competition, and confrontation, power is “structured” and “deconstructed,” altering the configuration and distribution of roles, capacities, and resources. The resulting power structure rewards, incentivizes, restricts, and penalizes various practices, setting boundaries on what is possible, acceptable, or desirable. This involves three fundamental processes: 1- interpreting (assigning meanings), 2- legitimizing (establishing norms), and 3- controlling (monitoring and safeguarding individuals and resources), all of which translate into domination. The specific forms of power structures vary significantly between democratic and authoritarian regimes (and even among different authoritarian regimes). Therefore, conducting a detailed and precise analysis of each case is essential to defining strategies to alter the political balance in various regimes.

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3 The relationship between agency and structure has been widely explored in academic literature. To delve deeper into the ideas presented in this section, from a power-focused perspective, the following sources can be consulted: Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984. Mark Haugaard, “The faces of power, resistance and justification in a changing world”, *Journal of Political Power*, 13:1, pp. 1-5, 2020. Mark Haugaard, “The four dimensions of power: conflict and democracy”. *Journal of Political Power*. 14:1, pp.153-175, 2021; Steven Lukes, “Power and Agency”. *The British Journal of Sociology*. 53: pp. 491-496, 2002. Michel Foucault, “El sujeto y el poder” *Revista Mexicana de Sociología*, Vol. 50, N° 3, pp. 3-20, 1988. For a critical analysis of power relations: Clarissa Rile Hayward, *De-facing power*. Cambridge University Press, 2000. And about the notion of “habitus” and its relationship with the social structure: Pierre Bourdieu, Loïc J. D. Wacquant. *An Invitation of Reflexive Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992

Power can also be represented in “geometric” terms.<sup>4</sup> That is, as a set of social boundaries that delineate the fields or spaces of possible action. Some are open or accessible, while others are closed or restricted, always depending on the type of regime. For instance, media outlets are typically open spaces in democratic regimes but closed –to varying degrees– in authoritarian regimes. The transition from the former to the latter can be achieved through the creation of alternative spaces, which arise from timely and pertinent actions such as demonstrations, protests, or civil disobedience, among others.<sup>5</sup> These actions become entry points. By thoroughly examining the conditions present in the different spaces, it is possible to identify windows of opportunity to intervene and catalyze transformations. Posing some questions can help facilitate this task. For example, how and who systematically blocks change? Who are the critical or indispensable actors? Which actors are important but not decisive? What are their motivations and interests? How can they be mobilized for political change? What discourses, perceptions, and beliefs underlie the norms and practices that sustain the power structure associated with the

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4 The “geometry of power” can be understood as a metaphor that describes the distribution, exercise, and representation of power within a social or political structure. It provides a way to visualize and analyze power relations in spatial terms. For further exploration of the spatial description of power relations, see: John Gaventa, “Finding the Spaces for Change: A Power Analysis”. *IDS Bulletin* 37.5: pp. 23–33, 2006, and John Gaventa, “Linking the prepositions: using power analysis to inform strategies for social action”, *Journal of Political Power*, 14:1, pp. 109-130, 2021.

5 It must always be remembered that the effectiveness of instruments depends on the existing social and political conditions at a given time and place. Under different conditions, the same instrument can yield different results.

regime? What degree of acceptance and legitimacy do they have? What strategy could we follow to subvert it?

In summary, power relations operate and prevail behind the institutional façade, manifesting in various forms (visible, invisible, or hidden) and flowing through different spaces (closed, open, alternative) and levels (local, national, global). All power seeks legitimacy and moves dynamically between obedience, disobedience, and punishment. In other words, dominating and being obeyed depends on the capacity to persuade (shaping representations, beliefs, perceptions, identities, etc.) and to repress (monitoring, controlling, and inhibiting actions). From a political perspective, both persuasion and repression are communicative acts. Therefore, the political battleground lies at the intersection and convergence of forms and spaces, with an awareness of the sources of power.<sup>6</sup> This is where political efforts must focus on to alter the existing balance of power and, ultimately, enabling the transition to a democratic regime.

## **Power Relations and Political Change Processes**

In most authoritarian regimes, including Venezuela, there is a formal reproduction of the institutional infrastructure typical of democratic systems. Depending on the type of authoritarian regime in question, this may involve a fictitious division of

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6 Four main sources are typically identified: political, military, ideological, and economic power. However, a deeper analysis of each –beyond the scope of this text– allows us to assert that, ultimately, economic power depends on political power, which, in turn, relies on “military” power (or coercive capacity) and ideological power. For a detailed discussion, see: Michael Mann, Mark Haugaard, “Reflections on the sources of power”. *Journal of Political Power*, 4(2), pp. 169–178, 2011.

power and minimal or nonexistent electoral competition, often characterized by various forms of fraud. The existence of pseudo-democratic spaces does not, of course, translate into effective citizen participation or political pluralism. Although opposition may be institutionally tolerated, authoritarian regimes employ a variety of tools to weaken or neutralize it: disqualifying leaders, fostering divisions, co-opting certain sectors, among others. By leveraging these instruments, electoral processes often become opportunities to legitimize authoritarian institutions and reduce the levels of repression that would otherwise be necessary.

For all these reasons, electoral processes associated with government changes between ruling parties and opposition in democratic regimes are far from being reliable mechanisms for achieving democratic transitions in authoritarian systems. In some contexts, and depending on additional factors, electoral processes may, at best, represent a window of opportunity to destabilize the power structure.

Authoritarian regimes, in summary, engage in battles across all political arenas. While their repressive nature defines them, they often resort to the fraudulent use of various democratic forms and procedures, narrative construction, and ideological work to legitimize themselves. In contrast, democratization movements are not only constrained by a lack of power resources and restricted access to spaces but also often avoid or forgo the complex and dangerous work required to penetrate and conquer these spaces. By failing to develop the necessary means to achieve their objectives, such movements end up relying on “black swans” or external actors. Instances where pro-democracy external actors are willing to exert sufficient pressure or overthrow authoritarian regimes by force are historically rare. Generally speaking, military

interventions to foster regime change and facilitate transitions to democracy are costly and uncertain ventures for any state, even if initial success is achieved.

From the opposition's perspective, the possibility of political change in authoritarian regimes fundamentally depends on the ability of individuals, groups, and democratic movements to work simultaneously on the various sources of power, creating and utilizing alternative spaces to penetrate closed spaces. The power structure sustaining the regime is not merely reproduced; it is challenged and deconstructed.<sup>7</sup> From the outside in, the regime is weakened until it gives way. To achieve this, it is necessary to identify the spaces that must be conquered and those from which progress can be made. Additionally, key actors must be mobilized within a new coalition against the status quo. Finally, it is essential to capitalize on opportunities that arise, whether they are significant or sudden changes in social conditions, leadership succession processes within the authoritarian regime, hegemonic crises, divisions within the power bloc –both vertical (fractures between hierarchical levels) and horizontal (rifts among members of the elite)– or a combination of both, as well as favorable international contexts and the emergence of external allies, among other factors.

In summary, identifying strategic entry points and executing intervention sequences that facilitate the transition from alternative

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7 That is to say, a work of resistance and subversion carried out through the exposure and unmasking of antagonisms, absences, and repressed, suppressed, or ignored contradictions in such narratives or discourses. See: Derrida, J., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, With a New Introduction (J. D. Caputo, Ed.). Fordham University Press, 2021.

spaces to closed spaces, including the state security apparatus, particularly the Armed Forces, is crucial. Unless a democratic transition is triggered by external intervention, political change cannot materialize without an internal fracture within the power bloc. The formulation of any strategy for democratic transition must begin with this premise.<sup>8</sup>

## **Final Observations on Politics, Power, and Violence**

The relationship between violence and politics, as well as its connection to power, authority, and legitimacy, has been the subject of intense debates, both from normative and empirical perspectives. The legitimacy of authority rests on the perception of its conformity with legal and social norms. However, the law does not emerge or establish itself on its own. It is instituted by an authority that often has its roots in historical processes and structures that are not necessarily (or initially) legal. The institution of law can thus be understood as the result of an act of force, raising questions about its legitimacy. From a genealogical perspective and through a critical analysis in which the concept is deconstructed, it can be argued that authority, in its origin, both implicitly and explicitly, is established through acts of violence that intertwine symbolic and material manifestations. Therefore, violence, whether in the form of coercion or as the legitimate use

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8 The fracture should not be seen as a “cause” but as a “condition.” When we speak of “fracture,” we are not referring to “cracks” that may appear within the leadership of the authoritarian coalition, but to definitive breaks within the power bloc, particularly those in which dissenting or opposing sectors to the maintenance of the status quo are able to mobilize coercive instruments.

of force, is inherent to the establishment and exercise of political power.<sup>9</sup>

Political violence is a communicative act aimed at influencing the decisions of others, thus differing from the mere use of brute force. Its main objective is not to punish or repress, but to dissuade the other. The response can vary, ranging from resistance to submission. Its use entails risks. Reactions can be unpredictable, both from those who suffer it and from those who administer it, potentially even eroding loyalties instead of maintaining or consolidating them and breaking obedience –especially when used on a large scale. When it is purely coercive, power tends to deteriorate, so it never ceases in its effort to legitimize itself, even in authoritarian regimes. Democracy is distinguished by its capacity to transfer or circulate power among elites peacefully, without resorting to violence, which is its main virtue. In contrast, in authoritarian regimes, violence or the threat of its use acts as the final arbiter of politics, to a greater or lesser extent depending on the specific type of regime.

Considering the implications of the points discussed earlier, it can be argued that the persistence of non-competitive authoritarian regimes over time is primarily due to two factors. First, the lack of effective institutional mechanisms that facilitate, force, and guarantee the peaceful transfer of power between

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9 In Bourdieu, the notion of social power as resources is always linked to that of symbolic power, and symbolic violence is seen as a form of coercion. See: Pierre Bourdieu, “Champ de pouvoir et division du travail de domination”. *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*. 5 (190), pp. 126-139, 2011. Clarissa Rile Hayward, “On structural power”, *Journal of Political Power*. 11:1, 56-67, 2018. Saul Newman, *From Bakunin to Lacan: Anti-Authoritarianism and the Dislocation of Power*, Lexington Books, 2007.

government and opposition, which is an inherent characteristic of such regimes. Second, the absence of deterrence mechanisms in the hands of opponents or dissenters that could persuade the authoritarian elite –or at least a faction of it– about the need to relinquish power or the risks of resisting change. The absence of credible deterrents makes it much harder for the regime’s more conservative factions to engage in negotiations or accept conditions for a democratic transition. Furthermore, for these deterrence mechanisms to be effective, they must target crucial aspects tied to the regime’s survival.<sup>10</sup> In authoritarian regimes, deterrence is often linked to the possibility or emergence of an internal fracture capable of triggering violent processes with uncertain outcomes. Fostering perceptions related to this fracture and promoting its materialization in a timely manner and within an appropriate context are essential elements of a strategy to increase the likelihood of a transition to democracy.

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10 Economic sanctions, for example, are often insufficient to provoke a regime change due to their inability to directly impact the vital processes that sustain non-competitive authoritarian regimes. This limitation is amplified in countries with socialist systems or clientelist capitalist economies, where the regime’s main political and economic allies are often other authoritarian regimes.

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