

# Democratización



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Human Rights defenders  
criminalized in present-day  
Venezuela

**Andrea Santacruz Salazar**

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# Totalitarian domination, citizen organizations and human rights: approaching the case of Venezuela

Miguel Ángel Martínez Meucci

## I. The totalitarian will of Chavismo

The consequences of more than two decades under the Chavista regime have been devastating for Venezuela. What for many years was the subject of warnings often taken for fantastic is not even disputed today: the voice of facts is now gravely imposed. However, the particular nature of the *logic of power* that hides behind Chavismo has not ever been easy to identify, given its changing appearance and the supposed popularity of its project. Behind green uniforms and red flannels, massive concentrations and endless broadcasts, anti-elitist rhetoric and anti-imperialist fury, behind the apotheosis of “popular power” and the communal state, experts have incessantly characterized and labeled the regime, sometimes even incurring in apparent contradictions.

Depending on the focus of specialists, Chavismo has been considered a militarist or praetorian regime, a populist dynamic and government, an initiative aimed at implanting a more participatory democracy, or a hybrid regime that experiences a

significant democratic deficit by virtue of its illiberal character. Furthermore, as of 2017, there has been an important consensus regarding the clearly authoritarian will of the Chavista regime. Other scholars have insisted on its revolutionary and socialist character, a description that coincides with the perception that the Chavista movement and government has of itself. More recently, the essentially kleptocratic and gangster drift that is becoming more evident day by day has also been highlighted.

I have personally tried to emphasize the value of all the previous characterizations, as each one of them captures a defining and certainly present aspect of the Chavista regime. Nonetheless, I have also insisted on the importance of finding a description that, on the one hand, harmonizes and integrates notions instead of contradicting each other, but that, on the other hand, is able to identify that which remains constant in the midst of apparent change. If every definition intends to answer the question of *what it is*, and if the *being* or *nature* of something corresponds to that which tends to remain in the midst of progressive changes and passing appearances, then the essence of Chavismo will involve, primarily, those traits that have always been present.

In this sense, I count myself among those who have spent the past decade systematically insisting on the determining nature of the *totalitarian* features of Chavismo. From my point of view, its totalitarian traits are not secondary, accidental or superficial, but absolutely essential in the Chavista movement/party/regime/State. And although I do not mean to affirm that a *totalitarian regime* has been established in Venezuela in all the sense and scope of the term (understanding regime as a system of clearly established formal and informal rules that fully correspond to an idea that can be characterized), I do consider that the presence of a *totalitarian logic* that inspires the ideas, speeches, actions and

objectives of the main leaders of Chavismo is clear and decisive. The existence of this logic indicates that its protagonists act rather constantly in accordance with it, despite the fact that the results of their actions are not always fully capable of generating those which they aspire to.

Additionally, it should be borne in mind that, since totalitarianism is so closely linked to the evolution of ideologies and technical potentialities, the totalitarian logics of the 21st century necessarily evidence novelties and differences with respect to those that prevailed in the mid 20th century. It cannot be otherwise when both the ideologies and the technical means for political control have undergone important changes since then. Now, if on the one hand it is true that ideology and technique make totalitarian domination possible, it is also true that both have an instrumental character. What does not vary, what has an essential and permanent character in totalitarianism, has more to do with a logic of power according to which an absolute truth assumed to be embodied in the people –understood as a single and compact subject– has to break through a permanent revolution that incorporates every individual and eliminates all dissent, in an attempt to fully homogenize and discipline people (*Gleichschaltung*).

Said incorporation and homogenization of individuals implies the absolute loss or cancellation of their moral autonomy, and the imposition of processes and movements on reasons and ends. The annulment of reason, the punishment of pluralism and the apotheosis of the collective and disciplined movement, justified by ideology and facilitated by the exhaustive control allowed by this technique, endow totalitarianism with that inevitable irrational and self-destructive character, but not before leaving the most cruel and mediocre characters in power. Totalitarianism is

the tragic, ephemeral and suicidal victory of “the administration of things” over the empire of reason and of “communicative action”, if by such we understand –in Habermasian terms– the sphere of intersubjectivity that emerges from the participation of free individuals. This totalitarian victory is only possible after breaking almost all natural and social ties on which a society has gradually been built. It is not by chance that its unavoidable result is –as Arendt insisted– plunging people into the deepest loneliness, substituting all spontaneous action for routines and absurd protocols that the totalitarian regime seeks through its single or hegemonic party.

As Juan Linz points out, this is completely different from what happens with conventional –not totalitarian– autocracies, whose logic of power is limited to guaranteeing the general obedience of the population and which has no particular desire to lead the population into sharing a single idea about the state of things. This is why it has a scant interest in ideology and perpetual mobilization, as well as a lesser emphasis on building a single or clearly hegemonic party. In the case of Venezuela, as we will express below, totalitarian tendencies are still present.

## **II. Social dissolution and “life in lies”**

Although the results obtained by Chavismo’s domination model differ notably from those of Nazi Germany, the USSR, Castro’s Cuba, Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge or North Korea’s Kim dynasty (in each case for different reasons), I would not hesitate to affirm that its logic of power, its way of understanding politics and its primary objectives are not too far from those that inspired the leaders of those political processes. A political, economic, social and demographic collapse like the one our country is currently experiencing does not happen under fairly

normal circumstances, and not even under most anti-democratic regimes, but rather implies submission to a brutal totalitarian logic of power during a prolonged period of time. From my point of view, the power logic applied in Venezuela for more than two decades is inherently totalitarian, without necessarily detracting from other characterizations elaborated thus far.

Despite differences, many of the aspects that make up people's daily lives in Venezuela today remarkably resemble the realities of various totalitarian regimes, such as those that prevailed in the second half of the 20th century in Central and Eastern Europe or in Castro's Cuba. I am especially referring to the portrayals of personal testimonies or great writers, which are usually more vivid and meaningful than the often dry language of contemporary political science. Much could be said about the way in which authors such as Pasternak from Russia, Marai from Hungary, or Kundera from the Czech Republic have reflected the vicissitudes of life under the advance of Soviet power. We could extract much from the reflections of people like Svetlana Aleksievich, Masha Gessen or Anne Applebaum, and above all from the direct testimony of anyone who has lived under such regimes. Here, I will only refer to the singular testimony that a leading protagonist like Vaclav Havel bequeathed us in his work *El poder de los sin poder*, or *The power of the powerless*, using his reflections to comment on challenges and situations that Venezuelans today would find familiar.

In the first pages of his famous text, Havel explains the importance of distinguishing the "post-totalitarian" system in which he lives (according to him, in the absence of better definitions) from a classical or conventional dictatorship. In a post-totalitarian reality, ideology plays a fundamental role because it establishes the official system of meanings that, in turn, uphold

the ubiquity of terror that guarantees obedience. Later on, that ideology no longer even has to be believed in for it to work; it is maintained through the rituals imposed over time. In a post-totalitarian phase, the regime no longer rests on popular support but on the validity of that control system that, managed by a few but sustained by many, is expressed through meanings reinforced over and over again by the repetitive formulas of official speeches and symbols. Even when very few believe in the official creed, its continuous repetition is effective because it seeks to communicate other points of view, thus reminding us of the constant presence of control mechanisms.

Havel calls daily life within that system “life in lies”: when individuals no longer find any possibility of freely expressing themselves without fear of reprisals. The problem of submitting to the lie again and again, of making it a habit, is that it ends up pushing the truth far into the depths of conscience. The fear of retaliation makes people deprive themselves from saying what they really think and from sharing freely with others who do dare to speak openly, while they are surrounded by a subdued press and constant surveillance in the work environment. The sudden or progressive dissolution of all autonomous organizations at the hands of official repression increasingly frustrates genuine motives for social cooperation, resulting in human beings living an ever-growing situation of loneliness, devoid of the necessary spontaneity in their social relationships. Our entire lives thus become a crude simulacrum.

Any wise reader will still notice that times have changed since then: Havel describes the Czechoslovak reality of the 80s, and since then ideologies have undergone important modifications, not to mention the extraordinary leap in technologies, especially ICTs. In other words, the technical means of totalitarian domination

have changed significantly in the midst of a global context that has generally been marked by the expansion of democracy and freedoms in the last three decades. However, this does not mean that totalitarian threats have been completely annulled; rather, it reveals how the way they present themselves and their means of control have evolved.

Even though we can find relevant differences in today's Venezuela when compared to Havel's experience, the framework of the situation may not be so different. Venezuela currently has more than one political party, but the political organizations that rival the hegemonic United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) have been infiltrated and subdued by the regime to the point of withdrawing control of their cards in electoral processes. Rather than holding elections, we are offered mock election processes. Similarly, there are still a number of more or less independent media outlets, but the vast majority of them operate under terror and, sooner or later, end up being controlled by the regime. In other words, free press is merely a facade. And although greater economic freedoms have been offered more recently, the only actors who can really access that benefit are attached to the current regime. Once again, we are facing nothing short of a simulation, this time of economic freedom.

Despite the ubiquitous control that tends to reach out through the most varied mechanisms, such as the "Sistema Patria", the "CLAP", the "communal state" and other initiatives of the movement-party-State, one could think that the breakthrough of social networks has consolidated an inaccessible space for the regime, as well as one to exercise personal freedom. But even this is only partially true, since social networks also provide unsuspected possibilities for supervision and control. China is the clearest example of how a post-totalitarian State is able to



use its own social networks to maintain exhaustive control of the population, designing algorithms to delve into the deepest thoughts of people. In Venezuela, a much less sophisticated case, we see the arbitrary detention of people merely for having publicly issued an insubordinate and independent opinion. And what is worse: while the degrees of self-censorship rise in various virtual spaces, we also observe the diffusion –guided by organs of the regime and its allies to a much greater extent than what could at first be suspected– of all kinds of fake news and opinions that inadvertently batter the relationship between word and reality, emptying language of content and dividing us into a multiplicity of tribes incapable of acting according to a minimum set of shared references.

Along with the effect previously described in the field of ICTs, the ideologies of our time have also undergone notable changes. Surely they are no longer great logical systems or “meta-stories” of a general interpretation of political reality, but rather, by virtue of evolution, they seem to sacrifice logical density for persuasion capacity through symbolic referents. If ideology is, as authors as dissimilar as Arendt and Sartori argue, a kind of “*lever for action*”, its effectiveness will be all the greater to the extent that it is capable of being transformed into propaganda, and as long as questioning syllogisms becomes more unlikely. In this sense, there is nothing in our time that contravenes the role that ideology already played in the totalitarianisms of the 20th century; quite the contrary: ideology has become more and more subtle and imperceptible, and it continues to strengthen ties with propaganda to become more and more persuasive.

Thus, totalitarianism of the 21th century are surely more insidious than those of the 20th century, insofar as the former make use of new techniques that allow them to better camouflage

themselves with the habitual clothes of democratic societies. The means are different, but the effect is remarkably similar and responds to a logic of power that, in essence, remains the same. In the case of Venezuela, the dynamics have reached the point of causing an economic disaster and a mass exodus, the greatest collapse experienced by a modern nation without the mediation of a warlike conflict or a natural disaster. In the midst of such a collapse, the loneliness of the individual is constantly deepening in a political context that, despite all its precariousness, continues to advance towards a situation of increasingly brutal domination. The Covid-19 pandemic has been an invaluable tool for the Chavista regime in its desire to isolate Venezuelan citizens, reducing them more and more to the ineffable world of social networks while the medical emergency unfolds without any attention or care from the State. After all, what characterizes totalitarianism is not systematic genocide, but rather, as Arendt said, a situation in which the human being has become completely superfluous. Unfortunately, present-day Venezuelans know too well what it means to be condemned to such superfluity.

### **III. Social and political rearticulation to “live within the truth”**

The multiple forms of citizen association that make up a free and democratic social fabric are the clearest indicators of its health and strength. After his visit to the young American democracy, Tocqueville sensed that there cannot be any free and vigorous society if its citizens do not strive to spontaneously form multiple free associations for the most varied purposes. That autonomy for free association is one of the main objectives that a totalitarian logic sets out to destroy. This dismantling takes shape in the constant penalization of said associations and in the co-option and alignment of all forms of popular participation within the various organs of the movement-party-State.

For these reasons, the only way to resist totalitarian attacks lies in preserving and strengthening the vigor of the spaces and mechanisms of spontaneous association of citizens as much as possible in each circumstance. We could classify such spaces and mechanisms in different ways, but for the moment we are interested in dividing them into two large spaces: those that propose the conformation and seizure of political power –identified during Modernity as State structures– and those that do not aspire to that, at least directly and explicitly. The former correspond to *political parties*, while the latter encompass the rest of civil society organizations.

It can thus be deduced that political parties are not a foreign entity to civil society, but are part of it. They are simply distinguished by their explicit and exclusively political purpose. By virtue of that particular specialization, political parties are in all likelihood the only effective way in which civil society can legitimately and democratically organize itself to participate in political affairs, in such a way that citizens are not just limited to requesting or requiring their leaders to do or stop doing this or that, but also to be able to directly take over the management of State agencies. Other forms of political participation that emerge in civil society, such as social movements or *nongovernmental organizations* (NGOs), can exert pressure on government decisions or fulfill functions complementary to the State, but are not specifically oriented to the management of its structures and institutions.

This especially applies in democratic societies in which a constitutional order and a rule of law already prevail, expressly aimed at safeguarding freedom and autonomy of citizen initiatives. Nonetheless, we have already seen that if under more or less conventional authoritarianism the free functioning of

political parties and other civil society organizations is hindered or prevented, then under a totalitarian system the aspiration is that every manifestation of citizens' will is predominantly similar in language, value system and political purposes to that preferred by the regime. To this end, actors who share the totalitarian logic strive to create "new institutions" that lack autonomy since they fully align themselves with the aims of the totalitarian movement/party/State.

Said organizations are not part *stricto sensu* either of the State or civil society. Its function within the totalitarian logic is –aligned with what Arendt called "the rise of the social" in the contemporary world, as opposed to the classic division of the world into public-private spheres– to simultaneously *privatize public spaces while nationalizing private ones*, thus violating the limits that guarantee both public freedom (positive according to Isaiah Berlin, regarding action and participation in common affairs) and private freedom (negative, aimed at protecting the dimension most intimate of human reality). Totalitarian logic seeks to monitor the intimate sphere of life of people as much as possible, taking the so-called "biopower" to the extreme to simultaneously put all the individual's powers at the service of its political objectives, isolated after being stripped of their most primary and natural affective ties (usually linked to the private sphere and the most elementary citizen associations).

The relationship that Arendt found between the modern "rise of the social" and the logic of totalitarianism led to situations sharply described by Havel in central and eastern Europe. According to the intellectual and later president of the Czech Republic, systems such as post-totalitarianism managed to reach a situation in which no one was totally guilty or totally innocent, since everyone contributed in some way to keeping a "life within

lies". In this context, opposing political parties managed to lose all their capacity to represent society and to embody a political option different from the regime, since they accepted to carry out their tasks within the rituals imposed by the totalitarian regime, even knowing that these rules would never allow them to access power. Likewise, people were terrorized into concealing or lightening the content of any discourse contrary to the regime –and its control rituals– and to create political programs that, instead of directly fighting lies, favored coexistence with it. Rhetoric that aimed to "improve socialism" and the like did nothing but contribute to sustain the system.

This type of situation generated a progressive distancing of people from politics, an attitude that Havel thought was a natural consequence. The author considered there was a wisp of healthy common sense, that is, people realized that, in reality, everything was different and thus everything had to be done differently<sup>1</sup>. Havel saw in this progressive rejection of politics the expression of a fundamental human need, which was "life within the truth". In order to regain fundamental freedom, human beings first had to regain the relationship between discourse and reality, between public expression and personal feeling, between action and moral autonomy. In other words, we would say that this distrust of politics expressed the need to recover *logos* as the foundation of politics, in order to give it meaning and relevance again.

The option that Havel chose as the beginning and foundation of this general recovery of politics was to start with people themselves and with their most basic needs. The option to "live within the truth" was based on the profound need for authenticity as a basis for free action, an action that in turn required reliance

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1 Vaclav Havel, *El poder de los sin* (Madrid: Ediciones Encuentro; 1990 [1979]), 60.

on a language that completely and radically departed from “newspeak” –in Orwellian terms– and the rituals of totalitarian power. Only people who had the courage to completely escape from this atmosphere of generalized mendacity, even knowing that this would completely remove them from any possibility of rearrangement in said totalitarian society, would be able to recover the deep meaning of their lives and, eventually, found a different political action, really oriented to a significant change.

In this way, Havel and his companions from *Charter 77*, determined to build a “parallel polis” where it was possible to “live within the truth”, found in human rights, and in the window that would be opened through the so-called “*Helsinki Process*”, the opportunity for the development of a public action of great political impact. All really meaningful politics required starting with people and their most basic requirements, and not from the calculations of the political rationality of the parties that struggled to preserve supposed power without radically questioning the bases of the totalitarian system. The proof of all this is that, when the opportunity for political change that led to the progressive collapse of the Soviet Union presented itself, it was those who promoted the Civic Forum –reconverted into a political party during the political transition– who had the necessary credibility to obtain popular favor in the first free elections after the end of communism.

It is probable that in present day Venezuela the totalitarian will to establish a system of social control as exhaustive and mechanical as those that prevailed in the Soviet bloc –a will that is evidenced in the repetition of many of its practices– has not obtained similar results. However, and as I pointed out in previous paragraphs, we must warn that the evolution of the technique, as well as the changes registered in the nature of ideologies,

necessarily point towards new forms of operation by totalitarian logics. If totalitarian domination takes hold where citizens lose the ability to exercise their moral autonomy, while –as a consequence of terror, the absence of truly critical options and opportunities to publicly exercise the power of judgment– they inadvertently tend to reproduce the discourses and rituals of totalitarian power, then the effectiveness of said domination will be directly related to the inability of citizens to perceive its mechanisms and tools.

It is worrisome that in Venezuela, in a more or less involuntary way, certain types of discourses and practices are being naturalized, which, observed from a more independent or external perspective –or less clouded by terror and automatic solidarity–, clearly contribute to hide reality. The advance of the Chavista newspeak, expressed not only in a particular lexicon and in the dissemination of a series of common places, but also in a whole diversity of discursive practices increasingly shared by the whole of Venezuelan society, is complemented by various intimidating mechanisms to have a devastating effect on the basic need to “live within the truth”. The harmful effect of these practices is now extraordinarily enhanced, in an unprecedented way and on a completely unpredictable scale, by the effect of social networks, which have become precisely the maximum expression of the “rise of the social”, which enables the mutual emptying of the public and private spheres on which totalitarian domination is established.

In unison with how Havel described his nation, a good part of Venezuelan political parties have been infiltrated, folded or neutralized by the movement-party-State, while various civil society organizations contribute involuntarily to reinforce some of the topics and practices that naturalize the current systems of control and domination. In the midst of all of this, the dissolving

effects of this situation are worsened, which is feeding the idea that a form of cooperation between political parties and other civil society organizations that goes further from the terms established by the Chavista regime is impossible or inconvenient. This may be the ultimate proof of the isolation and social fragmentation over which the totalitarian logic of power prevails.

In today's Venezuela, where formal politics have been progressively emptied of meaning, and where human existence not only takes place within lies, but is increasingly subjected to extreme vulnerability as a result, political action requires rediscovering its foundation in truth, rethinking itself from the existential reality of local citizens. There is no doubt that the uncompromising defense of human rights is an essential part of this struggle, insofar as they constitute –for our time– the clearest and most universal expression of the defense of the integrity of every individual. It is clear that any attempt to re-signify the political struggle involves actively defending human rights. But this struggle also extends to the defense and preservation of all spaces for meeting, deliberation and autonomous organization of society. Furthermore, within the political parties, a deep reflection on the nature of their work is required, which cannot be limited to formal action within the narrow and sterilizing parameters imposed by the regime's rituals.



## Conclusion

Thus concludes the thirteenth issue of *Democratización*, dedicated to Human Rights in Venezuela as we open our pages to the efforts of people and institutions that work to achieve justice in our country. The four articles included in this issue offer keys for reflection and collect testimonies that will feed our historical memory. At the FORMA Institute, we understand that the systematization of information and its subsequent analysis are antidotes against painful silence and harmful forgetfulness. This is our way of accompanying those who suffer the most and raising awareness about the seriousness of the present moment.

It is difficult to estimate the real impact of the sustained and systematic violation of Human Rights in our country. Knowing the depth of the damage caused and its personal and social dimensions requires in-depth studies. We want to encourage researchers, politicians and intellectuals not to rest on this purpose. The history of countries that have overcome episodes of repression and violence like ours teaches us that this work is valuable and irreplaceable. The first step towards healing is knowing the truth. In this sense, Venezuelan Human Rights defenders are the precursors of the necessary reconciliation that our country will eventually demand.

From what has been stated in previous pages, we can narrow down three ideas that we consider fundamental. First, the complex humanitarian crisis is a consequence of the systematic violation of the Human Rights of Venezuelans. Second, the abusive disposition of the Venezuelan State seriously affects the social fabric and imposes challenges for political articulation. And

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third, civil society and the political community are irreplaceable spaces for gathering information, accompanying the victims and alleviating the pain caused.