



Democratización

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Under circumstances marked by repression, the director of Funda-redes stresses that by speak-ing up people will be able to mitigate the chances of more people becoming victims.

True to its ways, the Chavista regime has avoided naming the group it is confronting in the state of Apure. When any accusations suggest the Colombian guerrilla, the ruling party tends to evade identifying the enemy. In the end, they make use of any figure or euphemism to blame the oligarchy and imperialism for the clashes that are convulsing the border with Colombia.

However, in the midst of the conflict, there are two targets clearly defined by those who wield power: non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and independent media, accused of “infocinating” the population to smear the image of the National Bolivarian Armed Forces (FANB) and favor irregular groups.

“The role NGOs are playing in this operation is striking, which simply seeks to keep violence in Venezuela at bay as well as drug trafficking from Colombia, to maintain peace and

to guarantee the sovereignty of our homeland. That is what we are doing in Apure”, was the answer Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino López gave on March 27 to reports of massacres and human rights violations in the area.

At the forefront of the NGO Fundaredes, Javier Tarazona (1983, San Cristóbal) is keeping record of the events in towns in Apure that lay at the crossfire between Venezuelan militaries and the guerrillas. Professor, specialist in Political Science with a PhD in Education, Tarazona stresses the need to speak up about the threats in order to stop violence from scaling.

–How would you describe the situation that has stirred Apure?

What we are seeing in Apure is not only the opacity imposed by the State, but the persecution of everyone. We are all suspects. There is a prevailing context of disinformation and violence against civil society in the region. The State takes on an evasive position and the Ministry of Defense does not know how to come forth or offer details, despite the fact that, since March 21, the longest dispute in that territory was sparked between the Tenth Front of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the FANB.

–Fundaredes has denounced the presence of the guerrillas and other irregular groups in the Venezuelan border. Can facts prove you right?

We have been working with Fundaredes for 19 years, but for more than those 19 years we have exercised local leadership to denounce extortions, kidnappings and hired killings on behalf of these irregular groups, the National Liberation Army (ELN), the FARC and paramilitaries, which have taken place in the

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state of Táchira. The entire border started to share that common denominator. We have filed complaints to national authorities, to the inter-American system and to the International Criminal Court. They denied them and criminalized and prosecuted members of our organization, as is the case of Alexis Bustamante, a prisoner in the Ramo Verde military prison, accused of treason for rejecting the presence of guerrillas in Venezuela. The regime's plan is to continue denying the presence of these groups, but the Apure conflict has forced them to acknowledge it.

–In the midst of the context you describe, how difficult is it for Fundaredes and NGOs to carry out their work?

We have been harassed from the start. I remember when we began to denounce hitmen in the state of Táchira between the years 2001 and 2002; we were said to be envoys from the United States, but we still showed the numbers of deaths at the hands of hitmen and each one of the victims' names. The regime has never been able to support with evidence their claims for criminalizing and prosecuting us, stating that "this" or "that" are setups, that they are false, that they are a lie. From then on, the entire discourse of those in power has been to deny the presence and their relationship with irregular armed terrorist groups such as the ELN and the FARC. We have experienced physical harassment, the arbitrary detention of activists from our organization, such as Alexis Bustamante, who is serving three years in detention in Ramo Verde, and our activists who tried to document events in Apure together with two journalists from NTN24 in March and who were arbitrarily arrested and even disappeared for a few hours under staged pretense.

–The Chavista regime increases legal restrictions against NGOs. Can you keep up your work despite increased repression?

We carry on because we believe in our principles: human dignity, the common good and solidarity. Like the sun, truth cannot be covered with a finger. We are assisted by truth, reason and rectitude. We raise our voices aspiring to contribute to a society that can integrate, grow, debate, discuss and, above all, build a different Venezuela than the one we are living in.

–In recent years, NGOs have assumed a relevant role in public debate. In your opinion, what are the causes of this phenomenon?

Civil society has been organizing itself in response to the fragmentation of the country and the criminalization and prosecution of political parties and leaders, something that NGOs have also suffered. It is the expression of totalitarianism in Venezuela. The organic activity of NGOs in Venezuela is the response to perverse actions that seek to silence dissident voices, the voices of the rights and aspirations of the people. We are assisted by the conviction that by speaking up we will be able to mitigate the chances of more people becoming victims. Above all, it is the route to rebuild the social memory that facilitates the development of our people and the overcoming of crime and terrorism as a way of doing politics.

–Much is said about the tension that exists between civil society organizations and political parties. Do they compete amongst each other or is there room for an alliance between the parties to fight for a shared goal?

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Without a doubt, there is a clear intention to fragment and divide. However, there are also articulation efforts. I believe that problems have united many sectors and actors in the country. Difficulties have made us look for strengths within organizations, and that has allowed us to weave the fabric that can become a concrete alternative for the transformation of society.

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.