



Democratization

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after twenty-two years of the Chavista
revolution

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No space for public spaces

Naky Soto

One of the consequences of 22 years of authoritarian rule has been the fragmentation of democratic forces. Public spaces have been attacked to a point of near obliteration both for citizens and politics: today, the streets are more dangerous. Protests are punished by State security forces with growing ferocity and guaranteed impunity for the perpetrators. Dissent is punishable by violence, imprisonment or exile. Political prisoners disappear, they become victims of cruel treatment, torture and even death. Their relatives as well. Citizens suffer yet another attack: the imposition of poverty as a means of social control by fixating their concerns. When it comes to either thinking of freedom or how to ration a limited supply of water over weeks, there is little opportunity for enlightenment in a devastated country.

The political opposition has managed to set successful partial and brief alliances when facing elections. However, their convergence on matters of everyday, public and non-institutional life has turned out to be much more complex. Incentives for Chavismo's fracture for those who support them are more efficient than the safe bet on persecution or imprisonment. Atomization, then, is not a decision but rather the consequence of the crystallization of Chavismo's goal to remain in power: to silence any democratic cry, by way of discredit, punishment or exile.

The challenge of bringing together dispersed forces in the public arena in 2021 demands incentivizing one group through elections, and others with the possibility of a future when everything in the country seems to proclaim its impossibility. However, the commitment to transcend regular incentives demands more and better modernity: What homologizes democratic wills? Where can those voices find common ground when public spaces have been annulled? Is it possible to find it in a country with no rule of law or justice?

Revenge, the only promise kept

Arbitrariness has been the norm of Chavismo. For 22 years the regime has acted above and outside the law. Public resources have been used with absolute opacity and impunity, regardless of the size of the amounts lost. Nicolás Maduro is the synthesis of all the limitations and deviations of the ruling Chavismo, lacking some of Hugo's features, but sharing his egotism and recipes. The lack of consequences on his worst decisions exponentiated his irresponsible rhetoric and his plans to further sink this nation, in a sort of primary and irresponsible voluntarism. The courage to be the blue-collared worker he never was. In any case, his failure in the exercise of government is undeniable: in any sphere of public management, inevitably, you'll be met with disaster.

Around him, a group alienated by power and wealth, *los enchufados*, also some military men who have served the government to serve themselves, and some citizens who, invited to evade all responsibility for their circumstance, gave their freedom in exchange for State paternalism and revenge. Even without benefiting from the distribution of wealth, they find discursive relief: "I may not have it, but neither do you".

Hugo Chávez embodied a great popular rejection, but his true promise, the one that he did fulfill, was revenge against his predecessors, the isolation of anyone who did not support him. His offer vindicated and exacerbated everything that is not right: poverty, anger, resentment, polarization, opacity, mistreatment, a despotic and arbitrary power, the denial of a democratic society, the denial of well-being, making us a much more inorganic, precarious society with few incentives for true cohesion. This political involution disrupted the State, which was quite backward, and with it, the entire political system.

Civil rancor

That faceless actor built at the service of the metanarrative of Chavismo, “el pueblo” or “the people”, retains some of the characteristics that were useful to Chávez at the time: resentment for what had not been achieved, dissociation between his work and the possibility to achieve it, and anger towards whoever had what the people did not. The leaders of the democracies of the 20th century did nothing to dismantle our own El Dorado myth, which basically stated that given our huge oil rent, which belongs to everyone, if you found yourself without that which you are entitled to, then someone else must have stolen it. By the end of that century, it was assumed that the uprising charismatic leader would set things right, and people only needed to be the spectators of the downfall of a system that prevented them from thriving, to offer their unquestioning support for each decision made by the leader, to defend Chávez and to hate the opposition – that is, half of the Venezuelan population– with the same ferocity. It was a horrible end for the society bred throughout 40 years of democracy. Then, after 22 years adrift, rancor took on other dimensions. Because Chavismo has stolen and excluded many more people in the name of its franchise, those who are now harmed

have multiplied. The loss of freedoms, the rule of injustice, family separation due to mass migration, poverty, electoral frustration, mockery against every exercise of dialogue and negotiation, the loss of political and civil leadership, the impoverishment of public services, the punishment of civil protests, the constant violation of human rights, the empire of lies as an official story... This all has created a society very distant from civility; a wounded, angry and rancorous society; a society that does not acknowledge its political estates because it assumes that they have not done their job.

How did Venezuelans get here?

We lacked tons of capacity for political judgment, that necessary combination of moral sense and justice, but also, the modernity that promoted the oil economy did not find footholds either in the forms of the State or in social aspirations. The management of oil revenues helped a good part of Venezuelans to dissociate the relationship between productivity and progress, between progress and development, between development and freedom, between freedom and democracy. The political elite of democracy lost connection with the demands of those most in need. Chavismo took advantage of this terrible circumstance and promised to vindicate them while submitting opponents and making them into pariahs, precisely because they considered them people with little political judgment to ponder over the forthcoming project. When we needed modernity, we had only 'bochinche'. At the same time, Chavismo crippled the individual autonomy of its followers as well as the capacity for political participation of its opponents. The exclusion of others from the political sphere was normalized.

Democracy was not understood as a participatory way of life, but was reduced to the set of institutions that guaranteed public life. We lacked more and better education around the concept of the common good, so that personal interests, as happened with the democratic parties of the 20th century as well as with Chavismo, would not trump the common interests, that is, to achieve the multiplication of wellbeing as a cohesive force.

With the arrival of the complex humanitarian emergency, hyperinflation and the economic contraction of 90% of our production, it should be clearer that the intensive participation of citizens is necessary, because most of our demands and needs are so basic that there is no way that they are exclusive: we all want water, electricity and domestic gas; we all want freedom, human rights and justice. Or at least most of us.

Blocking the electoral path

Electoral processes stopped being reliable in Venezuela because Chavismo decided so. They have practiced all kinds of arbitrariness on the popular will of the voting society, circumventing the results, punishing voters by migrating them to other polling stations, and even imposing parallel, not democratically elected authorities. This current effort to repackage the National Electoral Council (CNE), with the help of a sector of the opposition, is not based on a change of perspective with respect to the public, but on an imperative need to even out its excesses with labels of negotiation and institutional recovery. Once Chavismo faced the problems of governance and legitimacy, it decided to make it clear that the electoral route is no longer a possibility to change government. In this way, a government as nefarious as that of Nicolás Maduro has lasted more than the established legal period, without the support of citizens, without rendering accounts, in

the midst of the greatest economic and social precariousness that we have known, and with its new elites anxious to exhibit what they have garnered.

The scarcity of media and common sense

Losing the media directly meant the loss of reunion spaces and the absolute cancelation of the ability to massify common sense. Losing media, despite its limitations and biases, meant losing the community. That is why censorship has been a public policy in Venezuela. Criticism and diversity of opinions have been persecuted. Almost any spokesperson or media space that had greater reach and penetration than the regime has been beheaded and replaced with noise, propaganda or silence. Censorship in the country has not only meant preventing others from being free and from working. It started with something cruder that remained invisible to us: the corruption of the public media.

The fact that Venezuelans have naturalized state media corruption is shocking, because it means that we have forgotten and renounced normality. The argument does not have to be overexplained: using public money to favor the ruling party is corruption. It is not an “editorial line”. The media prevalence is not justified by the political conflict, and much less by the PSUV being the majority party, as claimed by its accomplices. It is, in fact, the looting and sequestration of everyone’s resources to benefit the tyrannical exercise of power. Furthermore, in the case of Venezuela, it is not only that the State media platform has turned spaces into its propaganda apparatus, but they have also increased exponentially the resources allocated to a complex media apparatus that they came to call “communicational hegemony”. From one (1) state television channel, now there are more than a dozen: VTV, Tves, ÁvilaTV, Telesur, Vive TV, Colombeia, ANTV,

FANB TV, PDVSA TV, Alba TV, Corazón Llanero, 123 TV, TV ConCiencia. Pro-government obscure capital was also used to buy private media which, although was kept as such, now follows editorial lines free from criticism or dissent.

No alternative

The little open television that remained was forced to close spaces devoted to political opinion in order to diffuse entertainment channels. Simultaneously, limited experiences of community media were created, but due to their partisan obedience and little budgetary autonomy, they came to be called governmental, or in the words of communication academic Raisa Urribarri, “*gobunitarios*”. And this merely regards television propriety. It turns out that despite all that apparatus, thousands of radio and TV hours with messages from the regime have been imposed on Venezuelans. Cadenas (national broadcasts) are difficult to explain to foreigners because massified broadcasts taking over every channel are exceptional occurrences in most parts of the world, such as in moments of very high national emergency, or Christmas greetings from a monarch. In Venezuela, cadenas, which are the imposition of the single discourse of power, are carried out daily, in a discretionary, capricious way and with messages that do not allow citizens to be better informed. They are unaudited government propaganda spaces.

When Venezuelans sought refuge in international media to find out what was happening in their own country, these were also censored. Satellite television services and cable operators were forced, under penalty of closure and expropriation, to eliminate CNN in Spanish, RCN, and Colombia’s Canal Caracol from their channel grid. Even Deutsche Welle, the German state channel,

was blocked after broadcasting an inconvenient documentary about Venezuela. Their signal was shortly thereafter reintegrated.

National censorship has not been circumscribed to politics, such as the veto of deputies and other opposition spokesmen, or the absence of coverage of public demonstrations or live political rallies. Chavismo has also had scenes of same-sex couples kissing in soap operas or series removed (Venevisión), and banned the screening of zombie film “Infection”, by Flavio Pedota, due to its criticism of socialism. Having lost the printed press not only reduced daily information spaces for millions of people, but also eliminated forums. Some spokespersons and leaders disappeared. The voices of intellectuals were turned off from the mass spectrum.

Instead of losing democracy with the loss of the media, we’ve lost modernity. That is why now our connection with the world is shaped not by the incorporation of novel variables in our lives, but by survival in an altered reality as we take refuge in Netflix or other downloaded movies. But this is not how the social fabric or the capacity for demand and pressure are rebuilt. Censorship is the design of silence, but also of the cloister of isolation, of the broken country turned into archipelagos that are ignored until there is no joint future but flight or meekness.

The loss of trust

Aside from “the truth”, the first victim in a conflict is trust. The differences between opposition political groups in Venezuela are marked by the destruction of trust among themselves, which makes it difficult for them to reach new agreements. The individual account drawn by some political personalities and those around them generally fails to, even by far, resemble what the country needs to channel a solution. On the contrary, potential fixes are planned and thought with each one calculating their own

future and share of power. The issue of personal survival, instead of a collective one, comes first. This spirit of “always landing on one’s feet” also led to other groups throwing the towel in front of the hegemon. They’ve negotiated bits of accommodation with the dictatorship and for a long time they have lacked agendas and proposals that promote the recovery of democracy and freedom. Rather, they generate new noises, take up space, and even hunt down and harass their former allies. They are an opposition as made by the regime. Meek, servile, anything but opposition.

The dilemma with trust is that it cannot be imposed. There is no decree that forces people to collaborate, mobilize, much less lend skills, efforts and resources. Trust is built in everyday life, in public and private spaces, with clear agendas that summon and show a shared future horizon. The projects are narratives. Hope is a story. The calls are community building and joint action. But they all need talent, resources, and a lot of work. 22 years after resistance, it should be noted that shortcuts, when they fail, can destroy progress achieved. Thus, trust in the political arena does not equal blindness and surrender. It is not a game of illusions. Instead, it comes down to collaboration, accountability, and measurable commitments to move forward together.

Those who must build a story

It is highly probable that, when negotiating, the different opposition groups, both in parties and in social organizations, have many more aspects in common than not, but this requires the will to work on transcendental issues and past the guilt over what hasn’t been achieved. As unusual as it may seem, the agenda of attacks against the interim, from groups that mix civil and political organizations that do not support the National Assembly elected in 2015, is much more intense and constant than against Chavismo

itself. This includes the constant repetition of three accusations: the false equivalence between the responsibility Chavismo and the opposition have regarding the crisis we are suffering; support for the thesis of Chavismo that attributes all difficulties to the sanctions imposed by the United States and other countries; and the confrontation of any humanitarian initiative of the interim deeming it “politicizing”, when the conflict is inherently political.

#FightingAndWinning

Without mass media, without ‘permission’ to take the streets, with systematic human rights violations, with the pandemic, and without hope of a mass vaccination, social networks have been the space for Venezuelans to connect. Twitter is at the forefront. Twitter is used to keep us informed and to discuss what is happening. Its use among Venezuelans is a phenomenon that would require another paper, but I am particularly interested in the improbability that Twitter becomes an ideal space to generate agreements, since popularity in that network feeds faster from conflict than concert. The stronger a disagreement, the more popular it will be. The way in which different political groups use Twitter evidences the denial of public spaces. Agreements are obstructed, while speed and disorder are privileged. Messages are designed not to discuss but to impact, which impoverishes the possibility of a democratic public dialogue. By adding anger as an ingredient, many Venezuelans live their Twitter experience as the possibility of “winning a fight”. And there, again, they can be much more aggressive against opposition leaders than against the regime. The incentive is quite sensible because a criticized opponent will not attack your life or send you to prison.

For its part, Chavismo lost almost all possibility of influence through traditional media, because by design, the problems do

not exist in the official imagination until the culprit is someone else. They became noise. People stopped identifying themselves after the death of Hugo Chávez. The agenda of problems that marks their lives (high cost of living, poor public services, etc.) are not part of the regular schedule. Lying as a rule divorced Venezuelans from official messages. Its contest on social networks is no different: Chavismo turns to social media to impose itself, to say what it has already planned (whether or not it is true, that is accessory), to deliver messages as if addressing its troops rather than citizens, with labels supported by bot farms, with little or no civil participation, and without much interaction with their audiences. Its attempt is to lead the tags of the day even if they do not achieve it in an organic way. Thus, they remain irrelevant to public life.

Challenging atomization

Democratic forces have to be able to recreate, maintain and strengthen a pluralist democratic unit, based on the idea of a change of government, but also committed to a political redemocratization that provides an institutional framework for other advances, for the exercise of plans for development that benefit a country mired in misery. Although Chavismo insists on the importance of the electoral situation, tainted by themselves, social mobilization is essential to demand negotiations that result in achievable commitments. This pluralist unity needs to be understood in its common objectives, some programmatic principles that allow its cause to be sustained despite their differences. The bet should attend to the ordering of plans that transcend political freedom and homologate more ambitious projects for national recovery. The more citizens know about these plans and understand their functionality, the more likely the demand for their realization and the development of the role of the democrat are necessary, since,

undoubtedly, the management of a new public space also involves the need to attract new activists and supporters for political and social organizations. A society that takes on again its leading role, that is organized to force political actors to change and comply, to be held accountable and to take responsibility for their decisions.

Reunions

Our transition will not be easy or short. Accumulated problems are enormous and require ambitious investments. Some, given the current size of our economy, even seem impossible to solve. We are a country of people in need: there will be no time for demagoguery and all correction must be thought with the potential to be not only effective but permanent. Redemocratizing the State and the Government means understanding democracy as an educational, cultural and development project. Our freedom will be married to our responsibility, because the ruling Chavismo will have to be held accountable, but the entire society will also have to develop civic and supportive behaviors. We have to convince ourselves that nothing will be soon and for that we must also reformulate expectations. The problem is to give more when so much has been given, but that's how it works. A republican and democratic country project demands that we be better citizens, bet on pluralism and debate, rebuild the culture of opinion and participation, rescue equality before the law and the subordination of all to it, and convince ourselves that dissent is essential to democracy. No government will be able to meet our expectations, but it will be essential to have the institutions to make it manifest.