

Democratization



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Ricardo Núñez, a Chilean politician, wrote about the difficulties faced by the Socialist Party of that country in the complex task of resisting the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. Before sharing his impressions, he offered this warning: “First of all, a formal precision. The reflections that motivate the following lines do not constitute a study in the strict sense, but rather a compilation of facts arising from a concrete experience”¹.

I am moved by his political and intellectual rectitude. This article has been in the back of my mind for some time now and I have thought about leaving it for scientific and political scruples. Núñez’s testimony encouraged me to publish it. And to begin with, I join his warning: I do not pretend to offer definitive conclusions. It is an approach that goes hand in hand with intellectual training² and personal experience³. I will outline realities that I

1 Ricardo Núñez, “La realidad escindida. El Partido del Interior y del Exilio”, *Nueva Sociedad* 74, n.º 1 (septiembre de 1984): 20–26.

2 I am a Doctor in Political Science (2019) graduated from the University of Rostock, Germany.

3 I currently live in Venezuela and I am part of the National Directorate Board of Primero Justicia, an opposition political party. I am in charge

have perceived in the exercise of politics in my country. I share them to leave testimony and with the encouragement to help us understand the moment we are living.

Notes on the Venezuelan opposition after twenty-two years of the Chavista revolution is an essay that is divided into four parts: (i) On the effects of twenty-two years of democratic struggle, (ii) On the extinction of the formal mechanisms of representation, (iii) On the atomization of the opposition political spectrum and (iv) final reflections.

Existence, institutions and culture

Hugo Chávez Frías came to power in 1999. Twenty-two years of revolution have led us to dictatorship. Venezuelans fully and prematurely experience what the current scientific and popular literature calls *democratic backsliding*⁴. We have witnessed the destruction of constitutional institutions and the erosion of democratic culture. Unfortunately, the efforts of the democratic forces have not managed to contain the autocratic advance of the Chavista-Madurista revolution and we face a complex dictatorship that amalgamates residues of the 20th century and novelties of the 21st century⁵.

of the political formation of the militancy and I work in the National Secretariat of Organization.

- 4 The rise of populisms encouraged Political Science to direct its efforts to study democratic erosions. There are multiple studies, approaches and perspectives. I recommend reviewing the following authors: Matheus (2014), Diamond (2015, 2016, 2019, 2020), Fukuyama (2015), Horowitz (2015), Plattner (2015, 2016), Walker (2016), Foa (2017), Mounk (2017), Howe (2017), Levitsky (2018), Ziblatt (2018), Rojas (2018), Ginsburg (2018) and Huq (2018).
- 5 Paola Bautista de Alemán, ed. *Autocracias del S.XXI: Caso Venezuela*, (Caracas: Editorial Dahbar, 2020).

International indices of freedom and democracy place Venezuela on the threshold of authoritarian systems. For example, the one developed by Freedom House lists it as “not free” (14/100)⁶. And that of Fragile States, created by The Fund for Peace, maintains that it is a “State on alert”⁷, preceded by the Democratic Republic of the Congo and followed by Uganda. Numerous studies have been written about his behavior and autocratic nature, among which I must highlight those of Miguel Ángel Martínez Meucci⁸, Juan Miguel Matheus⁹, Elsa Cardozo¹⁰ y Francisco Plaza¹¹.

It is worth asking, then, how this reality has affected the exercise of politics. In this section I will approach three areas that have been –and are– especially compromised in this sense: (i) existence (ii) institutions, and (iii) culture.

6 “Venezuela: Freedom in the World 2021 Country Report | Freedom House”. Freedom House. Retrieved June 29, 2021. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/venezuela/freedom-world/2021>.

7 “Fragile States Index 2021 – Annual Report | Fragile States Index”. Fragile States Index | The Fund for Peace. Retrieved June 29, 2021. <https://fragilestatesindex.org/2021/05/20/fragile-states-index-2021-annual-report/>.

8 Miguel Ángel Martínez Meucci, “Totalitarismo, cleptocracia y pandemia: la encrucijada del poder en Venezuela”, in *Autocracias del S.XXI: Caso Venezuela* (Caracas: Editorial Dahbar, 2020), 390–409.

9 Juan Miguel Matheus, “Configuración ideológica de la Revolución Bolivariana”, in *Autocracias del S.XXI: Caso Venezuela* (Caracas: Editorial Dahbar, 2020), 29–51.

10 Elsa Cardozo, “Democratización y resiliencia autoritaria”, in *Autocracias del S.XXI: Caso Venezuela* (Caracas: Editorial Dahbar, 2020), 143–62.

11 Francisco Plaza, *El silencio de la democracia* (Caracas: Los Libros de El Nacional, 2011).

I understand as existential what refers to the psyche¹² of those who work for the country's democracy. Twenty-two years of struggle have affected the inner world of the Democrats¹³ and the nation. Recently, Ana Teresa Torres published an article about the fatigue that this long itinerary of struggle has imposed. The author points out that "in 22 years of resistance it is inevitable that fragments of a list of errors, successes and omissions have accumulated in memory, even partially; of so many hypotheses, assumptions and gaps. And there I see the origin of this fatigue"¹⁴. It is the fatigue of the democratic struggle.

This tiredness, which grows on harassment¹⁵ of the dictatorship, has concrete political consequences. Torres explains that exhaustion leads to silence. And I would add, along with silence, discouragement, fear, distrust, disorientation, among others. It is perhaps the Creole version of what the Cuban Dagoberto Valdés calls anthropological damage and describes as "...the weakening, injury or breakdown, of the essentials of human personnel, of their internal structure and of their cognitive,

12 I use the term "psyche" alluding to what Ortega y Gasset indicates in "Civilization, culture and spontaneity" (1920). For the author, the "psyche" is "the root of personal existence". In metaphysical terms and inaccurately, perhaps we could say that it refers to the human soul.

13 Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn referred to the "soul of nations" and identified the existence of political projects that seek to colonize it through the domination of language and culture.

14 Ana Teresa Torres, "El cansancio - La Gran Aldea". La Gran Aldea, April 23rd, 2021. <https://www.lagranaldea.com/2021/04/23/el-cansancio/>.

15 According to the Organization of American States, there are currently 350 political prisoners in the country. The National School of Journalists denounced 355 attacks on the press on 2020. The main political parties have been proscribed. And, recently, the Administrative Providence No. 001-2021 of the Unified Registry of Obligated Subjects was registered before the National Office Against Organized Crime and Terrorism Financing that constitutes a direct attack on non-governmental organizations.

emotional, volitional, ethical, social and spiritual dimensions, all or in part, depending on the degree of disorder caused”¹⁶.

This existential fatigue affects all spheres and instances of politics across the board. It hinders the articulation of efforts. Frustration leads to “every man for himself” and “all against all”. Consensus, agreements, and the common agenda turn difficult. Judgment can be clouded and, in some way, the use of reason is limited and dangerous voluntarism begins to reign. Thus, politics starts dissolving.

Let us now look at the institutional level. In this analysis, I will refer exclusively to political parties¹⁷. The opposition’s victory in the 2015 parliamentary elections accelerated the autocratization of the Chavista-Madurista revolution, with the political parties and their leaders being victims of this process. There are –at least– three pieces of information that show this: (i) In the elections of December 6, 2015, the most important electoral organizations in the country¹⁸ were legalized. Today they are

16 Dagoberto Valdés, “Causas, síntomas y consecuencias del daño antropológico provocado por los regímenes totalitarios”. *Democratización* 7 (marzo de 2020): 5-16.

17 I recognize that the opposition spectrum transcends political parties. However, I consider that in Venezuela political parties continue to be the protagonists of the democratic struggle for two reasons: (i) tradition and political culture and (ii) the organizational capacity that they have managed to maintain over time. Civil society makes valuable contributions, but –in general terms and with some exceptions associated with the Catholic Church– they still have a different and limited structural development.

18 Primero Justicia, Acción Democrática, Voluntad Popular and Un Nuevo Tiempo.

outlawed. (ii) Their main leaders are in exile¹⁹ or persecuted²⁰. And (iii) the dictatorship has resorted to bribes to buy the conscience of media militants who pretend to confront it and seek to set up an official opposition, a loyal opposition²¹. In addition to this, the IDEA-UCAB Study Mission report on the conditions of the 2020 parliamentary electoral process analyzes the progressive loss of electoral guarantees in Venezuela and identifies “three waves of judicialization of political parties”²². This precision shows the authoritarian drift of the Chavista revolution after the 2015 parliamentary elections.

The complex humanitarian crisis and the pandemic exacerbate this situation. Party men and women must reconcile material poverty with terror²³. In recent months, there have

19 When reviewing the status of the highest decision-making bodies of the country's main political parties, we find that a high percentage of their members have had to go into exile. In the case of Primero Justicia, Julio Borges and Tomás Guanipa –National Coordinator and Secretary General, respectively– had to leave the country. Similarly, Leopoldo López –leader of the Voluntad Popular– is in exile in Spain.

20 Manuel Rosales Guerrero, President of Un Nuevo Tiempo and Henry Ramos Allup, National Secretary for Acción Democrática, have open criminal cases in the Attorney General's Office.

21 In January 2020 the dictatorship carried out the so-called “Operación Alacrán”. It consisted of buying the vote of nineteen opposition deputies from different political forces. This action sought to weaken the Legislative Power and allowed to change the balance of forces of the National Assembly. In the framework of this political move, a ruling from the Supreme Court of Justice took away the electoral cards from Primero Justicia, Voluntad Popular, and Acción Democrática. And it dismissed its Board of Directors and handed over formal control of the organizations to the so-called “alacranes”.

22 Roberto Abdul, Eglee González Lobato, Luis Lander, Eugenio Martínez y Benigno Alarcón. Retrieved June 29, 2021. <https://politikaucab.files.wordpress.com/2020/11/informe-idea-version-final-11102020-5.pdf>.

23 “Terror” is a difficult variable to estimate. It is complex to know its real weight or how it operates inside people. However, there is evidence that allows it to be identified as a present reality that does not deserve to be

been two events that have deepened the difficulties that affect the exercise of party politics: (i) migration and (ii) deaths from Covid. According to figures from UNHCR, there are currently 5.4 million refugees and migrants from Venezuela around the world. In this way, it is noted that a part of the political party structures has left the country²⁴.

Then there is the pandemic. It is impossible to offer exact figures on deaths due to Covid, even less within the parties. The dictatorship has handled the figures opaquely. There is an obvious underreporting of infections and deaths. Marino González, following the data offered by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, indicates that “for Venezuela, as of April 2, the daily cases would be between the limits of 6,924 and 13,561. The average would be 9,505, that is, nine times more than those confirmed”²⁵. In this way, party structures face –at least– three

ignored. I recommend reading the interview that Milagros Socorro did with the writer Milagros Mata Gil, who was detained for a few hours for writing a critical text of the dictatorship. In her testimony, she states: “I was impressed by fear: many deleted me from their contacts or left my groups (on WhatsApp). Some called to support me, almost clandestinely”. See in: <https://lagranaldea.com/2021/05/03/fui-detenida-por-una-venganza-personal-de-tarek-saab/>

²⁴ It is difficult to determine precisely how migration has affected political party structures. It is information that organizations guard with zeal. However, from my experience, I can say that the phenomenon particularly affects the border states and means a continuous “starting over” in some territories. It is a challenge for the Organization Secretaries. An interesting fact is that Primero Justicia and Voluntad Popular have created institutional bodies to serve their followers and militants who are outside the country. In the case of Primero Justicia, it is called “PJ Mundo” and it is found in 25 countries.

²⁵ Marino González, “To see the estimates of Covid-19 cases by @IHME_UW by countries, you can consult: bit.ly/2QA4L7g. In Venezuela, as of April 2, the daily cases would be between the limits of 6,924 and 13.56. The average would be 9,505, that is, nine times more than those confirmed”.

difficulties simultaneously: harassment by the regime, poverty and Covid-19.

The reality described affects the political parties as organizations that lead the democratic struggle in Venezuela and mainly impacts the coordination of efforts and internal communication in different instances: (i) in the base structures and (ii) in the political leadership.

Let's start by examining the question at the basic level: How does this situation affect their internal communication and coordination capacity? Before the pandemic, militants used to meet periodically in spaces for local deliberation. Now it happens that the members of the structures emigrate and the constitution of the regional instances is constantly altered. Face-to-face meetings are also limited for fear of contagion and, as public transport is severely limited due to lack of gasoline, it is very expensive to travel to meetings. Militants often do not have the money to attend. In this way, migration, Covid and poverty seriously affect this institutional dynamic.

Now let's look at the communicational side of things. The Chapultepec index, which estimates freedom of expression and of press, places Venezuela in the last place on the continent (3.80)²⁶. Behind Cuba (6.20) and Nicaragua (16). This seriously affects the exercise of politics. Militants lack information, which limits decision-making. Added to that, the regime's propaganda is powerful. Their lie is transmitted by all media (traditional and

April, 18, 2021, 6.31am. <https://twitter.com/marinojgonzalez/status/1383729906941534208?s=20>

26 "ÍNDICE CHAPULTEPEC». ÍNDICE CHAPULTEPEC. Retrieved June 29, 2021. <http://www.indicedechapultepec.com/>.

social media) and censorship makes opposition efforts invisible²⁷. It is not an exaggeration to say that there are moments of total uncertainty when it is difficult to distinguish the truth from things and facts. It is living in silence and in the shadows.

Let us now see how political leadership is affected. As I mentioned in previous lines, the heads of the main opposition political parties are being persecuted or in exile. It is difficult to specify how or how much this situation affects and there are not enough inputs to analyze this delicate aspect in depth. However, the distance, the harassment of the regime, and the pain of recognizing itself as extracted from the country affect the decision-making bodies. This has happened in other countries and the Venezuelan case is not different. When reviewing the history of political parties that have survived long-standing dictatorships, such as the PSOE²⁸, It is observed that the passing of injustice tends to crystallize misunderstandings, disagreements, and differences that can become complicated over time.

I will now evaluate the cultural element. For Ortega y Gasset, culture “is the decantation of our primal powers and appetites”²⁹. Since people are its makers and that it is the purification of our

27 Censorship in private media is particular. It has happened to me that, before entering interviews (the few times that I am invited), the producer warns me about the words that I cannot use. It is the glossary of the prohibited. Once something “funny” happened. When I published “Autocracias del S.XXI: Caso Venezuela” (2020) a journalist told me: Doctor, we are going to do the interview. But we can’t say the name of the book on the air. So the interview was really strange. I don’t know if in the end, someone understood what we were talking about. The truth is that I do not complain or fight. That glossary of the forbidden, in a sense, is a form of resistance. In a way, I celebrate and appreciate it.

28 Santos Juliá, *Transición: Historia de una política española* (1937-2017) (Madrid: Galaxia Gutenberg, S.L, 2017).

29 José Ortega y Gasset, *Meditaciones del Quijote* (Madrid: Cátedra Letras Hispánicas, 2005).

impulses, we can see that what is described in the existential sphere imposes alterations in this context. In recent months I have identified a constant that worries me: the trend of “all against all” as a pattern that is repeated in the few spaces for deliberation that remain. It seems that confrontation has been installed in the ways of interacting. In immediate terms, this constant tension hinders the generation of consensus and, in the medium term, damages the strongholds of democratic culture that have resisted the autocratic advance. In short: it seems that the importance of pluralism and the challenges of dissent have been forgotten.

In short, these two decades of struggle have affected the Venezuelan democratic forces. The described wear is transversal and affects the people (the existential), the institutions, and the culture of the country. In terms of Samuel Huntington, it is about the progressive erosion of pre-democratic conditions inherited from the Civil Republic (1958-1998).

The silent discontent

The triumph of democratic unity in the parliamentary elections of December 6, 2015, accelerated the authoritarian tendencies of the Chavista revolution. By recognizing itself as an electoral minority in the country, the dictatorship deepened the process of destroying electoral conditions to configure a non-competitive scenario where the predominance of the ruling forces is guaranteed.

This reality can impact the democratic struggle in various ways. But for the purposes of this essay I will dwell on what I consider to be its main practical consequence for the opposing forces: *as the mechanisms of formal representation (elections) are*

extinguished, the opposition is stripped of references that allow it to create instruments and methodologies to generate consensus.

The most recent successful experience of an opposition platform in Venezuela was the Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD). It was created in 2008 and served as an instrument for political struggle while the Chavista revolution was a competitive authoritarianism³⁰. Its successful performance was mainly due to three reasons:

- First, it was an electoral platform in an authoritarian environment that retained features of competitiveness. This means that with unity, organization, participation, and international observation, the abuse of power could be overcome and the will of the voters preserved.
- Second, the weighting of forces within the instance was marked by previous electoral results. According to its internal regulations, the political organizations that had more weight in decision-making were those that had the greatest capacity for formal representation according to their previous electoral performance. Electoral victory was taken as an indicator of representation and mobilization capacity. In this way, everyone knew how much power they had, the rules of the game were clear and consensus was facilitated.
- And third, the dimension of the alliance was eminently electoral. It did not demand substantive agreements on the autocratic nature of the Chavista revolution and responded to a common strategy that bet on the accumulation of

³⁰ Steven Levitsky y Lukan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War (Problems of International Politics)*, (Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

forces and the conquest of spaces as routes for an eventual democratization.

In 2021 the three circumstances that made the Mesa de la Unidad Democrática possible and successful are not present. The Chavista revolution advanced towards a closed or hegemonic authoritarianism. And by eliminating the minimum conditions of electoral competitiveness, it avoided –among other things– the photograph on the correlation of opposing forces that allowed to regulate the consensus mechanisms. In addition, the exhaustion of the electoral strategy –as it was conceived in 2008– opened doors to debate on the nature of the regime and the suitable, legal and viable types of struggle. In conclusion: the democratic struggle has become more complex and demands the revision of the consensus mechanisms that were used in recent years.

The underlying problem behind this practical matter of politics is representation. It is a concept that has a dose of mystery: Why and how does a person manage to embody the wishes and aspirations of a community? In this sense, I understand by representation what was proposed by Eric Voegelin in “The New Political Science”³¹. The author suggests that representation is observed in the capacity for political and social articulation and mobilization that political actors have. Representation becomes a reality when a leader sets the course, makes a decision, or signs an agreement and has the voluntary obedience –the consent– of the entire society, not just his followers. The power of representation becomes real when that leader has the ability to encourage the struggle, to trace paths, and move towards a common destiny.

31 Eric Voegelin, *La nueva ciencia política: una introducción* (Buenos Aires: Katz editores, 2006).

In a democracy, representation finds a material channel in elections. Citizens vote for their preference and specify the formal representation. In a dictatorship, the situation is different. As there are no formal representation mechanisms, the coordination of efforts is seriously hindered and the atomization of forces is fueled. The prevailing question is: How do we know which political force represents the interests of the population if there are no elections? These cases –like the Venezuelan– where autocratization has been progressive and inertias of the deposed democratic system are preserved are more complicated.

This crisis of representation is a serious obstacle to the democratic struggle. On the one hand, the country feels mute and, on the other, those of us who fight for democracy perceive that we are overwhelmed by discouragement and, somehow, we cannot find that country that wants to fight. It is a void that some men and women of science call “disconnect.” It is not the first time that this has happened in our country and it occurs within the framework of a crisis of global representation. The dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1948-1958), although it had a very different mood from the current one, also led to a crisis of this type that unleashed tensions between the political forces. Rómulo Betancourt, in a letter sent to Rafael Caldera in 1957, testifies to this: “... our duty as political leaders, whatever the ideology we profess, is to awaken those volitions in our people, currently dormant, but by no means asleep”³².

32 Naudy Suárez Figueroa, comp. Rómulo Betancourt, selección de escritos políticos (1929-1981) (Caracas: Fundación Rómulo Betancourt), 206.

The atomized opposition

I understand by atomization the dispersion of forces in the political spectrum³³. In this section, I will focus on three aspects of the Venezuelan case: (i) Causes, (ii) Symptoms and (iii) Effects.

I will begin with the causes of the atomization in the Venezuelan opposition. I find three reasons that are not unique or exclusive and surely deserve to be expanded. First, the regime and its violence. Second, the extinction of the formal mechanisms of representation. And third, the differences of opinion about the autocratic conception of the regime. I developed the first two causes in previous sections and I will not return to it.

Let's look at the third: the differences of opinion regarding the autocratic conception of the regime. Far from being an intellectual precision, it is a matter that affects the practical exercise of politics because from the conception of the dictatorship, the strategies to confront it may or may not be derived. In the Venezuelan opposition spectrum, I identify two positions that are distinguished according to their assessment of the capacity for internal reform of the Chavista-Madurista revolution. I find two positions: (i) those who consider that Chavismo has high potential for internal reform and can move towards democracy and (ii) those who believe that Chavismo has low potential for internal reform and serious limitations to advance towards democracy. The identification of these cleavages is an effort to describe a political reality that undoubtedly transcends these theoretical exercises. With this statement, I want to emphasize that between

³³ I opted for the term atomization to refer to a deep fragmentation. The term fragmentation, commonly used by Sartori (1996) and Linz (1987), seemed insufficient to describe this phenomenon.

both positions there are nuances that also shape the country's opposition political spectrum.

Let us now delve into the cleavages *high potential for reform - low potential for reform*. Those who make up the former understand that the Chavista revolution is a non-democratic system susceptible to internal reforms. They bet on the accumulation of forces and spaces of power as a path to autocratic liberation. They promote electoral participation –even without electoral conditions– to gain space and progress towards democracy in a progressive manner.

We must remember that the Venezuelan opposition has already traveled a similar path for a decade and in a unitary manner. I must point out that, although there are similarities, the current situation is not entirely the same. The political context makes the difference. Between 2005 and 2015, the Chavista-Madurista revolution was a competitive authoritarianism because it maintained certain conditions of electoral justice that the opposition knew how to take advantage of. At present, the Chavista-Madurista revolution is a closed or hegemonic authoritarianism that seriously limits the conditions of transparency and electoral justice. In this sense, the current situation is not the same.

It is also convenient to delve into the political performance of the progressive strategy developed by the unitary forces between 2005 and 2010. Political performance is understood as the capacity of the opposition to advance the democratization process or achieve political change. Let's see the results of the three electoral events that took place in that period. In the 2012 regional elections, la Mesa de la Unidad Democrática won 3 of the 23 governorates. A year later it obtained 81 of the 337 deputies and in 2015 the qualified majority of the National Assembly won with 112 deputies out of a total of 167. The electoral advance of the

opposition option is observed: in the 2012 elections, 13% of the spectrum was won; in 2013, 24%; and in 2015, 70%.

But, as explained in previous lines, the opposition's victory in the 2015 legislative elections prompted a change in the political context. The Chavista-Madurista revolution accelerated its autocratization process when it recognized itself as an electoral minority in the country. In this way, it hampered legislative work and the exercise of the mechanisms offered by the Constitution to promote political change³⁴. And the conditions of electoral justice were severely limited³⁵. In this sense, it can be affirmed that progressivity was a successful strategy closely associated with two context variables: the semi-competitive environment and the unitary strategy, described in the previous section. For these reasons, it must be considered that this kind of struggle was viable and successful as long as it did not represent a real threat in terms of central power for the Chavista-Madurista revolution. When the regime was challenged, it became more autocratic and put a brake on the fighting genre chosen a decade ago by the opposition forces.

Let us now look at the cleavage low capacity for reform. Those who make it up understand that the current configuration of the Chavista-Madurista revolution is not very susceptible to internal reforms towards democracy. In this sense, they propose that efforts should be aimed at creating political conjunctures that promote an autocratic flexibility that can open doors to political

34 Carlos García Soto, "Bloqueo de las funciones legislativa y contralora de la Asamblea Nacional", en *Autocracias del S.XXI: Caso Venezuela* (Caracas: Editorial Dahbar, 2020), 182-202.

35 Roberto Abdul, Eglee González Lobato, Luis Lander, Eugenio Martínez y Benigno Alarcón. Retrieved June 29, 2021. <https://politikaucab.files.wordpress.com/2020/11/informe-idea-version-final-11102020-5.pdf>.

change through negotiation and restitution of the vote with minimum conditions of competitiveness and electoral justice.

It is convenient to pause briefly on two issues: (i) the basis for this perception and (ii) the means to generate conjunctures that can drive political change. Regarding the first, it should be specified that there are no unique or exclusive arguments that explain human perceptions. Its formation is a complex process and is nourished by personal and collective experiences. And, furthermore, the perception of the reformist –or non-reformist– potentiality of Chavismo has been built over more than twenty years of democratic struggle. It can be inferred that the abrupt outcome of the progressive strategy that I described above informed the perception of the low capacity for internal reform of Chavismo-Madurismo. It can be thought that, if there were a reformable stronghold in the regime, it would have crystallized in 2015 or 2017. The authoritarian advance that developed from the electoral failure of the PSUV in the legislative elections of that year may show that those who lead the Chavista-Madurista revolution today have little disposition to lead internal reforms and advance towards democracy.

Let us now delve into the media to generate conjunctures that can drive political change. The conjunctures are political milestones that can lead the dictatorship to a state of revolutionary necessity. Juan Miguel Matheus describes it as follows

...I understand by a *state of revolutionary necessity* the set of economic, political, social, international, and military circumstances under which all measures (legal or illegal)

are activated and justified to ensure the subsistence of the revolution; and, particularly, for the permanence in power³⁶.

The means to generate conjunctures can be varied. Among them, we find social mobilizations, for example. This path has also been followed by the Venezuelan opposition. In 2014, 2017 and 2019, there were massive protests nationwide that were harshly repressed by the state security forces and by irregular groups. According to the Venezuelan Conflict Observatory, between April and August 2017, there were 6,729 protests and 163 deaths. And the report of the International Independent Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of the United Nations highlights and specifies the systematic violation of Human Rights in the framework of these mobilizations. In this way, it is observed that when the regime faces a situation that truly threatens its permanence in power, it strengthens its repressive force and violently subdues the demands of democracy.

These differences of opinion about the autocratic conception of the regime can limit the creation of common strategies, affect the unitary capacity of the opposing forces, and favor atomization. In this sense, it can be positive for the democratic struggle to find ways of conciliation between both positions. This analysis requires data that can contribute to that purpose. It is observed that both cleavages share two fundamental realities that can be the starting point for the encounter: first, both recognize that they face a non-democratic system and, second, both unleash the repressive forces of the dictatorship when they become a real threat to the central power. In other words: they start from the

36 Juan Miguel Matheus, "Configuración ideológica de la Revolución Bolivariana", in *Autocracias del S.XXI: Caso Venezuela* (Caracas: Editorial Dahbar, 2020), 29-51.

same thing and, if they successfully advance towards autocratic liberation, they face the same fate.

The three causes of atomization explained above make up the Venezuelan opposition spectrum. The main symptom of atomization is the proliferation of new political forces. To the main political parties³⁷, now the so-called minorities³⁸, the minorities of minorities³⁹ and civil society⁴⁰ are added. As a reference, it is worth mentioning that the most recent statement from the Venezuelan opposition⁴¹ was signed by 40 political parties: Acción Democrática, Aprisal, Alianza Lápiz, Bandera roja, Buscando soluciones, Camina, Copei, Convergencia, Cuentas Claras, DSM, Encuentro Ciudadano, FIEL, Fuerza Liberal, Gente Emergente, Goajiraven, Guillermo UNE, Izquierda Democrática, La Causa R, MEP, MPV, MDI, MIGATO, Movimiento Ecológico, Movimiento Republicano, Moverse, Movimiento Zulia Humana, Nuvipa, PAM, PARLINVE, Partido Centro Democrático, Primero Justicia, Proyecto Venezuela, TISON, Sociedad, Un Nuevo Tiempo,

37 The main political parties are called G4: Acción Democrática, Un Nuevo Tiempo, Voluntad Popular, and Primero Justicia.

38 The minorities are the so-called G9, made up of: Acción Democrática, Voluntad Popular, Un Nuevo Tiempo, Primero Justicia, Causa R, Proyecto Venezuela, Encuentro Ciudadano, and Movimiento Progresista.

39 The minorities of minorities do not have an institutional name that refers to them, but it is estimated that there are more than 30 political organizations that are part of the opposition coalition.

40 The so-called "civil society" is organized into two coalitions: the Broad Front (Frente Amplio) and the Civic Forum (Foro Cívico). El Foro Cívico was created in 2008 and is made up of political and social movements. There are more than sixty organizations. El Foro Cívico was created recently (2020). It is not known how many organizations make it up, but it includes Transparencia Internacional Venezuela, Convite, the University of the Andes, the Union of Christian Churches, and Fedecámaras, among others.

41 "Unión por el futuro, la democracia y el bienestar de nuestra nación" of April 21, 2021.

Unidos Para Venezuela, Unidad NOE, URD, Vanguardia Popular, Voluntad Popular. In addition, there are opposition forces that are not part of this coalition. For example, Vente Venezuela, a political movement led by María Corina Machado.

Along with this quantitative indicator is a qualitative description. Although there are political forces larger than others in their territorial extension and in their capacity for organization and mobilization, none of them alone has enough power to successfully confront the dictatorship. It is difficult to elaborate an accurate description of the structural state of political and civil organizations at the national level. Structures are understood to be the organized and institutional configuration of the militancy that performs regular party tasks: meetings of its regional directors, contact with the national political leadership, and organized protest activities, among others. The conformation of Regional Political Commands⁴² reveals the presence of G4 representatives in the 23 states of the country. This data could explain the operative predominance of the partisan forces to execute mobilization plans summoned from the democratic unit. An example of this was the development of the “Consulta Popular” (Popular Consultation) that took place between December 7 and 12, 2020. This political action had the purpose of making visible the discontent of Venezuelans at the electoral fraud of the legislative elections of 06 December 2020. For this event, 3,028 participation centers were installed nationwide, 6,848 tables, and 25,828 witnesses were activated. Although it was an initiative of civil society, it was the political parties that were in

⁴² The Regional Political Commands are the local unitary instances. They are made up of the G4, minority parties, and members of the Frente Amplio. Privately, the person who writes has had access to the database that contains their configuration.

charge of its execution and coordination. Each G4 political force installed 757 centers, 1712 tables, and 6457 witnesses.

Let us now turn to the effects of atomization. The first practical political consequence is the difficulty that exists in generating consensus and articulating efforts. In Venezuela, there is a political spectrum made up of more than a hundred small forces in organizational capacity that differ in ways and strategies to confront the dictatorship. And, although they understand the need to generate consensus and strengthen unity, they do not find the mechanisms to build them. The second consequence is the strengthening of the dictatorship. This scenario favors the strengthening of the dictatorship. For this reason, the regime promotes dissent and makes efforts to deepen the differences between opponents. An atomized, weak and disjointed opposition favors those who want to remain and exercise power in a dictatorial way.

Final thoughts

This article is an approximation to the current situation of the Venezuelan opposition. Here are three final thoughts:

1. Twenty-two years of the Chavista revolution have left their mark on those who resist the dictatorship in Venezuela. In this article, consequences in three specific areas were described: the existential, the institutional and the cultural. These details can help to understand and contextualize the current situation of the Venezuelan opposition and to warn against the challenges that must be faced in order to advance towards democratic liberation and the subsequent reconstruction of the country.

2. The unity of the opposition factors is an irreplaceable variable for the democratic struggle. Its irreplaceable character increases when the political forces choose the electoral route as a strategy to confront the dictatorship. Between 2005 and 2015, the Venezuelan opposition traveled this path and managed to build a stable unit of the opposition forces, leveraging on two environmental conditions: (i) The Chavista-Madurista revolution was a competitive authoritarianism and (ii) the mechanisms of formal representation –the elections– offered a scenario that allowed the creation of internal regulations in order to generate consensus. In 2021, both conditions are absent. In this sense, the restitution of both context conditions could allow a return to the previous scheme and build an efficient unit at the service of democratic liberation. And to achieve this purpose it would be convenient to direct efforts to the fight for electoral conditions. While this end is achieved, I believe that work should be done on the construction of unitary instruments for consensus without formal representation mechanisms.
3. In this article, two cleavages were proposed that are distinguished according to the perception of the regime's capacity for internal reform. The cleavage that perceives high potential for internal reform in the dictatorship is betting on a progressive strategy and the accumulation of forces. When analyzing progressivity as a strategic option, it is necessary to return to the opposition's performance between 2005 and 2015. This study shows that progressivity was a viable strategy while it did not attack the stability of the central power. That is to say: it was allowed to advance (local elections of 2012 and 2013), but when it showed itself as a real option of power (legislative elections of 2015)

it was met with the repression of the regime and it was exhausted. For its part, the cleavage that perceives low potential for internal reform in the dictatorship bets on the generation of critical junctures that force the dictatorship to become more flexible and open to a negotiation process that allows free, transparent and verifiable elections to be held. This path has also been partially traveled by the Venezuelan opposition. Between 2014 and 2019, large social mobilizations were carried out that were harshly repressed. The violence of the regime extinguished the social mobilizations. Once the limits of the strategies of both cleavages have been identified, it is convenient to recognize the scope of the autocratic learning of the dictatorship and create strategies that take into account its resilience.