

# Democratization



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# Three ideas on electoral simulation

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Hard days. The dictatorship has struck. As if it were a troupe of perversion and violence, it struck out at civil society and political parties. The regime, days before meeting with the European Union's exploratory mission, arrested Javier Tarazona and other members of Fundaredes. And days after meeting with them and having promised them that they would favor the electoral climate, they took Freddy Guevara. This repressive outpost occurs when the opposition tried promoting two scenarios to move towards democracy: regional elections and an eventual negotiation.

The dictatorship has offered its account of what happened in several speeches, the most relevant being Jorge Rodríguez's press conference and Nicolás Maduro's meeting with the opposition that money and shamelessness have allowed him to buy. First I will take a look into Jorge Rodríguez's press conference. In this scenario, they wanted to show us that Voluntad Popular has an extraordinary capacity for articulation capable of giving instructions to criminal groups that have traditionally been related to the regime. Four WhatsApp screenshots were absolutely insufficient to support that astonishing theory. However, for those who live in lies, the truth may be an irrelevant fact. The purpose of that press conference was very specific: to bully Voluntad Popular and to deepen the differences between those of us who

fight for democracy and to install fear in the body of those who resist in the country.

Let us now look at the Miraflores meeting and these words from Nicolás Maduro: “Deputy Bernabé... right there, where you are sitting, Henry Ramos Allup was sitting (...) Right there, where you are sitting, Deputy Luis Parra, Henrique Capriles Radonsky was sitting... in the same chair. Right there, where you are sitting, Deputy Timoteo Zambrano, Julio Borges was sitting”. With these phrases, once again, his strategy is revealed: to use the regional elections as an instrument to displace the real opposition and impose a loyal opposition and, in this way, to create interlocutors that will help him to strengthen himself in power. The dictatorship will be indulged if a political context dawns on November 22 where the electoral simulation gave the desired results: the imposition of a loyal opposition that appears to confront it and allows it to advance in its purposes of domination.

It is a difficult time. Questions of a practical nature intrude: How to face these paths? What can Democrats do when an adverse context has set in? Looking at countries that have gone through similar times, I want to share three ideas that do not claim to be universal, but can contribute to reflection. I understand that we live in moments that demand creativity and the spectrum of opinion is truly extensive.

First idea: *recognizing the simulation*. In her most recent book, Anne Applebaum explains that between “1945 and 1989, many of the communist parties in Eastern Europe allowed their opponents to play some role in the state, in rigged parliaments or in public life”. The idea of electoral simulation and loyal opposition is not new. We are facing its Chavista version. Acknowledging this is important because reality limits the dangerous voluntarism that

is the germ of frustration and pessimism. Therefore, openness to the context can be the first step in creating a strategy that allows us to resist and face the future with responsible hope. There is also a practical issue worth delving into: What happened to the loyal opposition in Eastern Europe when the USSR collapsed? What happened was that these forces did not lead the democratic transformation and went down in history as elements that favored the dictatorship. On occasions, I have heard different analysts who affirm that the only way for political parties to survive this situation is by participating in regional elections, with or without conditions. From what has been explained in previous lines, I do not fully share this perspective. It is a very difficult time and I believe that the main risk that participation in the electoral simulation of November 21 imposes on us is to become a loyal opposition and thus seriously hurt the opportunities for freedom for our country.

Do I mean by this that we should not go to elections? Not necessarily. And in order to explain myself better, I turn to the second idea: *clinging to the truth*. The electoral simulation of November 21 may or may not be an opportunity to fight. The difference can be made by the way we deal with it. I am afraid that if we ignore the difficulties described in the previous paragraph and go to the election with a naive enthusiasm that promises unrealizable things, the country will not accompany us. Venezuela is tanned in pain and frustration. We have tried everything and our soul is exhausted. We condemn vain promises and withdraw from the public when we perceive that there is no common agenda. In these difficult moments, we are obliged to speak the truth to the country: *So far, on November 21 there will be no elections, there will be an electoral simulation. It will be an event without conditions where everything is arranged so that our will is not respected. It will be an unfair contest and, in democratic terms (winning*

*spaces and exercising power*) it will be impossible to “win”. You may think that the truth will keep people from the polls on the day of the simulation. That is one possibility. And it is up to us to encourage them –or not– to be part of a civic act that seeks to redefine the concept of success. Perhaps we should assume that on that day the victory will not only be measured in votes but also in courage, in organizational capacity, and in the testimony of collective struggle. Let’s not invite the country to a “vote of punishment”, let’s call it to a “vote of protest”.

I move forward to my third idea: *to work in unity*. Challenging the simulation of dictatorship will only be possible if we have the support and enthusiasm of the entire society. The work of political parties is irreplaceable, but insufficient. It must be accompanied by a well-disposed civil society and a citizenry that is committed to this kind of struggle. I dare say that this aspect will be the most difficult to achieve. In the last few days, I have seen worrying signs. The reactions on social media to the imprisonment of Freddy Guevara reveal the boredom of a country that demands explanations and deliberately withdraws from the public. This issue is complex. In other spaces, we must delve into the reasons that provoke this attitude that seems predominant. However, and observing the work of democratic forces that have overcome long-term autocratic episodes, I can say that a first step to regenerate these relationships of trust is to bear witness to coherence and honesty. Let’s go out into the streets, speak to the country, and summon it to fight, banishing voluntarism and recognizing the harsh reality that we have had to live through.

Politics is contingency. We must not lose sight of the fact that the context can also hide democratizing imponderables that may surprise us. Perhaps the episode in our history that best accounts for this is January 23, 1958. Marcos Pérez Jiménez’s escape was

unexpected and incredible. Rafael Caldera summed it up like this: “it seems like a dream”. There are moments in which the evolution of history amazes us and, perhaps, it could reward us. The reader may wonder why an article like this, fraught with difficulties and challenges, ends with this reference. I have decided to end in such a way because the gravity of the present time forces us to face reality without closing ourselves to what we cannot see. Having our feet on the ground with our eyes fixed on the sky will surely make our load lighter.