



# Democratization

Year 2, Issue 7

Causes, symptoms and consequences  
of the anthropological damage produced  
by totalitarian regimes

**Dagoberto Valdés Hernández**

The new rules of the game.  
Change and continuity in the struggle  
for redemocratization in Venezuela

**Miguel Ángel Martínez Meucci**

Transformation for Venezuela:  
Gangster State and democratization

**Paola Bautista de Alemán**

MARCH 2020

# The new rules of the game. Change and continuity in the struggle for redemocratization in Venezuela

Miguel Ángel Martínez Meucci

The country faces a challenge of gigantic proportions. It is not only a change of government that is being proposed, nor a change of regime, and not even the recovery of the State, it is a change of the national project, a renewed idea of nation. It is the only conceivable result of the consequences of the colossal collective shipwreck which Chavismo has led to, as well as the unintended consequences of the long struggle undertaken by a good part of Venezuelan society to free themselves of said regime.

Despite the urgent need for changes in the country, the scale of the challenge hinders any advance without dedicating, in parallel, enough time, energy and patience to a general reflection, rooted in the deepest causes of the current situation and oriented towards the future. A reflection that, incidentally, cannot just result from two or three people. It is necessarily a national reflection, a wide-ranging debate in which all the forces of the nation must participate. There is no doubt that we require answers and guidelines to take

action, but this requires asking ourselves the right questions and fully understanding the fundamental dilemmas.

This essay intends to contribute to this purpose. Firstly, it addresses the main losses that Venezuela has experienced in recent years as a nation and as a democratic society. Secondly, and based on the foregoing, it is argued that we are now facing new general rules of the game, while attempting to describe their basic characteristics. Subsequently, the importance of both internal factors and the international context in this change in the rules of the game is considered. Thus, the way is paved to address some guidelines for action in the medium and long term in a next edition.

## **I. On the losses suffered**

1. Liberal democracy: from what has been breached to what is yet to be done

The drastic changes in the last decades have led to significant losses in terms of our profile as a society and as a nation. These losses are in some cases rectifiable, sometimes even in their entirety, but in other aspects they eventually appear as definitive, facing us with the need to innovate. What things that have been lost *can* we recover, and what can we not? Similarly, what things *should* be recovered, and what should be left behind? A quick review of these types of questions will show us that, possibly, and as a society that struggles for change, we have not yet reached a minimal consensus to answer them, which suggests that we can hardly draw a future horizon towards which direct a national reconstruction project.

The first loss, the most evident from every point of view and on which there is already a broad consensus, is *the progressive and sustained loss of democracy and freedoms*. The advance of Chavismo has inexorably translated into the implantation of an increasingly autocratic regime, in which individuals and the civil society have been systematically restricted from all spaces designed for the free exercise of their autonomy. The allegedly popular, preponderant, plebiscitary or “democratic” character of Chavismo, celebrated for many years due to confusion or interest shared by a multitude of politicians, academics and all kinds of commentators, now looks clearly exhausted or non-existent. Sufficient proof of this is provided by all democracy indices (V-Dem, Polity IV, The Economist, etc.), which coincide in pointing to the Chavista regime as a hegemonic authoritarianism from 2016 onwards.

Just as there is a clear –and at this point, indisputable– consensus regarding the loss of democracy and freedoms, *there is also a clear consensus regarding the need to regain them*. This obviously refers to the consensus that is needed among democrats, in strict adherence to the pursuit of good, and not to the consensus between –or with– their adversaries. For democrats, it is unacceptable for Venezuela, well into the 21st century as we are, to be built around an autocratic regime. The fundamental objective in this sense is the recovery of modern, liberal, representative democracy, which is characteristic of Western societies of our time.

Disagreements begin –often inadvertently– when we try to go beyond the absolutely general points made so far, when we try to *conceptualize both the type of liberal democracy that has been violated and the one we wish to consolidate from now on*. Dissent arises, to a large extent, as a result of the relative absence of a common minimum lexicon, of questions that are not yet considered appropriate,

and of a public offering of well-articulated ideas regarding these issues. These absences are often justified as a consequence of the need to maintain absolute unity in the fight against the dictatorship. However, when dealing with fundamental issues, it is inevitable that discrepancies and inconsistencies emerge sometime or another in the face of the demands imposed by reality, and the consequence of delaying these debates is their superficial treatment in social media, where simplification, offense and polarization often lead the debate down a sterile track.

When this issue is not avoided, it is found that the debate is raised, *roughly*, between those who fundamentally propose the *recovery* of the liberal democracy model prior to 1998 and those who consider its *renewal*. While some assume that it is possible and desirable to return to the Venezuela of the 70s, 80s and 90s by restoring the prevailing mechanisms and practices of those years, others believe that this is no longer a possibility within our reach and that it is not even desirable in its entirety. If the path towards recovery leads, in short, to re-implant a fundamentally social democratic order in which the State is erected as a universal *buffer* of social conflicts, operating as a great redistributor of income and as a “great payer of bills” of the Venezuelan society, a different model –if it is so– would instead lead towards a liberal democracy in which the State is, above all, an institutional and relatively impartial *arbitrator* during social disputes, as well as a manager of the minimum conditions that allow the exercise of a true and free individual autonomy.

Surely this does not exclude the possibility that it is desirable to recover the best aspects of the system that managed to prevail during previous decades. Nonetheless, this does not imply a repetition of the previous recipe. A different institutional system,

capable of generating similar or better results but in more firm and sustainable terms, would have broad popular support. In this sense, if we were to identify the most important results obtained by the “Civil Republic” (1958-1998), I would possibly be inclined to point out those related to daily coexistence, such as a minimum of vital stability, civil harmony, civic friendship and, ultimately, the healthy spirit of moderation that the democratic period managed to instill in our society. This *moderation* is considered, from the most remote age, as an important republican virtue, a minimum necessary condition for the harmonious life of the *polis*. Perhaps it is not an exaggeration to highlight that the healthiest, the most important and what we most yearn for today of those decades is that singular spirit, not easy to achieve, by which the Venezuelan came to be constituted –or at least consolidated – as synonymous with openness, generosity, pacifism, affability and coexistence.

This moderation is often considered as an immovable attribute of national temperament or identity, a characteristic feature of the Venezuelan way of being and existing. However, it seems to me that it is a mistake to identify a certain way of being –in anthropological, sociological or cultural terms– with the difficult political achievement that civil harmony implies. Although the general tendency has been to believe that we, Venezuelans, *are just like that*, my personal position leans rather towards the idea that the moderation on which civil harmony is based –and whose progressive absence makes us feel surprised and nostalgic, at least those of us who are old enough to remember it– has been a difficult and progressive conquest of Venezuelan society, an achievement deeply tied to certain historical junctures and processes that were combined favorably in the second half of the 20th century, largely

as a consequence of the work of an illustrious leadership, but also of structurally favorable circumstances.

On the one hand, the tireless work of the political leadership that lead the political pacts of the 50s and 60s –especially that of Puntofijo– was, for many decades, the engine which built a society that was not at all “doomed to be democratic”. Without the presence of such a virtuous leadership, Venezuela could perfectly have been inclined towards a succession of bloody dictatorships like those that proliferated in the rest of Latin America, or like those that had abounded in its own past. On the other hand, the progressive consolidation of this democracy also benefited from the use –reasonable for that time, under the conditions in which it took place and judging by the impressive modernization of Venezuelan society– of a providential resource such as that of *oil rent*. Political science has taken charge of this reality through the studies of researchers, among which Karl<sup>1</sup> and Rey<sup>2</sup> stand out. These authors emphasized the essential role of income in establishing pacts and rules of the game, smoothing out hitherto irreconcilable rough edges and burdening the State with the costs of the different intersectoral agreements of the Venezuelan democratic society. Indeed, the presence of this resource, unexpected at the beginning of the 20th century, allowed Venezuelan society to avoid direct payment for a series of goods, decisions and transactions that in other societies run either on each person’s own account or are conflictingly imposed on certain sectors. Venezuelans avoided and averted these conflicts thanks to the commonwealth.

---

1 Terry L. Karl, *The paradox of plenty. Oil booms and petro-states* (Berkeley Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1997).

2 Juan Carlos Rey, *Problemas sociopolíticos en América Latina* (Caracas: Faculty of Legal and Political Sciences, Central University of Venezuela, 1998).

After all, before oil rent was consolidated and used to sustain a vast and generalized system of benefits and subsidies, Venezuelan's affability did not lead them to systematically exclude, for example, recurrent political violence during the wars of the 19th century, those wars during which Venezuela so closely resembled other countries in the region. And perhaps that is why, once again today, when our country has fallen to the sixth position of oil producers in Latin America, we see how the bill can no longer be paid by the State and social conflicts regain their virulence, while intolerance seems to progressively gain the ground that it had been losing during the Civil Republic. Consequently, thinking about the -liberal?- democracy of the future involves thinking about how the Venezuelan society and the State will manage these natural social conflicts in such an uncertain context regarding the volume and control of income.

## 2. The end of the "oil century" in Venezuela?

The foregoing leads us to address another of the significant losses suffered in recent decades: *the condition of a country with a clear vocation for oil*. Stating that Venezuela is no longer an oil producing country may still constitute, to some extent, an exaggeration. After all, the main source of national income continues to be oil, in a country that has what is possibly the largest crude oil reserves on the planet. However, we could well be facing the end of the "Venezuelan oil century", at least in the terms in which we have come to know it so far. Under what Carrera Damas called the Venezuelan "liberal-democratic project"<sup>3</sup>, implanted since the Puntofijo Pact, oil was used as a tool not only for development and cultural modernization as had been happening in previous

---

3 Germán Carrera Damas, *Una nación llamada Venezuela* (Caracas: Monte Ávila Editores, 1997 [1980]).



decades, but also for democratization and social harmony. This task was not free of populist deviations, but the development of the country during the Civil Republic is simply undeniable.

On the contrary, during the first years of the Chavista project, oil became the tool of the most blatant populism, to later become, definitively, an instrument of an undemocratic foreign policy, of authoritarian consolidation, totalitarian control and generalized plunder. Today the national oil industry is destroyed: all its drilling operations have been paralyzed, wells have been abandoned, infrastructure is in decline, and the international projection of its markets has been completely subjected to a foreign policy from which national sovereignty has been hijacked. In the words of Milton Friedman, if you put communists in charge of the Sahara desert, in five years there will be a shortage of sand, the exact case of Venezuela with respect to oil production (it took Chavismo 20 years).

For two decades, economic policies have focused on increasing massive subsidies with the purpose of establishing a vast political clientele, unhinging the price system, breaking the autonomous local business community, damaging the purchasing power of the national currency and detracting all value from productive work. After such policies –developed paradoxically during the biggest oil boom–, the sudden and disorderly dollarization experienced during 2019 has forced the country to face the most brutal price readjustments, thus being forced by Venezuelan society to suddenly accept the harsh rules of global markets in the worst possible terms. As we will be further argued, the country has now come to experience the consequences of an accumulation of many years of political decisions –some of them even before Chavismo–

which stubbornly inhibited us from transforming into a different society and less dependent on the State.

Under these wretched current conditions, the costs and sacrifices that civil, democratic and institutional negotiation of social conflicts entail can no longer be borne by the oil-rich and benefactor State. Quite the contrary, the onerous tally that was accumulated as a consequence of wanting to defer to the impossible a more reasonable distribution of costs has ended up being paid –and it could not be otherwise– by the majority of the population, under tragic conditions, in fact, after handing over the leadership of the State to a predatory and autocratic clique. It is a tally that grew so large that there are already more than 5 million Venezuelans living abroad, often working under the most difficult circumstances and supporting their relatives in Venezuela by sending remittances in dollars.

Thus, as the unsustainable dikes and moorings that rentism insisted on implementing –especially after the unhinged management of the last 20 years–, the country is now in terrible conditions to face the weight of reality, to the point that its very integrity as a sovereign state is at risk. For the political and party system, this situation resulted in a progressive loss of democratic coexistence. Thus, the partial but relatively operational political coexistence between the government and the opposition that is established in hybrid regimes –such as the one that prevailed in Venezuela between 2003 and 2015, where it was partly financed by public revenues– finally gave way to a fully authoritarian system, where the sector that controls the State now only accepts to live with a loyal and totally harmless opposition to the dictatorship, while it persecutes or annuls those truly committed to the redemocratization of the country.

Thus, oil revenues ceased to be an instrument of progress and democratic conciliation and became a tool for an authoritarian project, as is the case in the vast majority of petrostates. However, the management of oil was corrupted in such a way that the very continuity of the oil industry has been compromised, giving way to a system of unproductive economic activities, largely linked to organized crime (smuggling, drug trafficking, money laundering, illegal extraction and commercialization of valuable minerals, etc.) In short, it seems that we are facing *the progressive collapse of the political economy of oil rentism*, as well as the emergence of a new logic that feeds on a purely extractive economy, which does not correspond to developing nations and is generally associated with poor countries and is marked by the presence of fragile States and prolonged armed conflicts. Under such conditions, is it possible to return to the political economy that prevailed during the Civil Republic or will it be necessary to establish the foundations of a substantially new model where oil plays a different role within a different State and society? Although we lean towards the second option, the question remains open, and its answer largely depends on understanding the type of State that we now have.

### 3. The state capacities

A central element in this dynamic is the loss of capacities of the Venezuelan State, to the point that national public opinion has become the subject of debate regarding its eventually *failed* or particularly *fragile* nature. However, there is no absolute clarity about what state capacities or state fragility are. In this context, what are we to understand by “State capacity”? How does the above relate to the idea of a failed or fragile state? What can be concluded regarding the Venezuelan regime when studying the

evolution of the capacities of the State? Such doubts demand reviewing such concepts.

According to traditional political theory, strongly inspired by Hobbes and Weber, a failed or fragile state –and therefore, with low state capacities– would essentially be one that is incapable of exercising a legitimate monopoly of violence over the population that inhabits a particular territory. However, in the context of the liberal democratization of the last century, the idea of state capacity has been associated with the concepts of *governability* and even *democratic governance*; that is, it has included –besides control through the use of violence– the idea that state capacities imply both the effectiveness in the implementation of basic public services and the legitimacy of the rulers and even the democratic nature of said legitimacy.

Thus, according to the Crisis States Research Network (CSRN), a *fragile state* is one that is particularly prone to experiencing a *crisis* in one or more of its subsystems. In turn, a state crisis is understood as a situation in which the current institutions are the subject of severe disputes and are potentially unable to handle shocks or conflicts<sup>4</sup>. On the other hand, a *failed state* is one that experiences a collapse whereby it is no longer able to preserve its basic security, perform its most elementary functions or protect its territory and borders<sup>5</sup>. Fund for Peace uses similar definitions and elaborates an annual index of state fragility based on indicators grouped into various categories<sup>6</sup>, while according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) a fragile

---

4 See Crisis States Workshop – London, March 2006 (retrieved on 11/04/19):  
<http://www.lse.ac.uk/internationalDevelopment/research/crisisStates/download/drc/FailedState.pdf>

5 Idem.

6 See: <https://fragilestatesindex.org/methodology/> (retrieved on 11/04/19).

region or state has weak capacities to carry out basic governance functions and lacks the capacity to develop mutually constructive relationships with society, while they are also more vulnerable to internal or external shocks such as economic crises or natural disasters<sup>7</sup>.

Another way of approaching the problem of state capacities is brought forward by Charles Tilly, who –within the framework of his theory of democratization– associates it both with the subjection of state decisions to the popular will and with the capacity of state organs to alter the power correlations that exist between the different groups that make up society. Consequently, he literally defines *state capacity* as:

the extent to which interventions of state agents in existent non-state resources, activities, and interpersonal connections alter existing distributions of those resources, activities, and interpersonal connections as well as relations among those distributions<sup>8</sup>.

For his part, Joel Migdal explains that the political-administrative structure that is the State always fights, against other social organizations, to implant an image of a coherent dominant organization in a territory<sup>9</sup> which claims to embody a singular morality, a standard way, the right way, in fact, of doing things. This claim, which we could call “moral hegemony”, implies identifying the legal with the moral, which in turn entails the identification of any social conduct that violates the provisions

---

7 OECD 2014: *Domestic revenue mobilisation in fragile states*; cited in <https://nsdsguidelines.paris21.org/es/node/291> (retrieved on 11/04/19).

8 Charles Tilly, *Democracia* (Madrid: Akal, 2010 [2007]): 16.

9 Joel Migdal, *Estados débiles, estados fuertes* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2011): 34.

of the State as “criminal” or “punishable”, that is, a conduct that is not only illegal but also morally wrong<sup>10</sup>. From this point of view, it can be affirmed that the notion of state capacity also involves the more or less effective power to establish the parameters of public morality and the common good. Both Migdal and Fukuyama<sup>11</sup> point out that, from its origin, the ability of the State to exercise its hegemonic role depends largely on the perception that people have that said apparatus of government really seeks their well-being, and that in this function it is more effective than various types of “strong men” who, on a smaller scale, tend to fulfill similar functions in pre-state societies. Tilly has also referred to this issue when stating that a primary function or attribute of the State is its ability to integrate, within public policy, the personal networks of trust –religious, economic, cultural– that are developed in society<sup>12</sup>.

In short, not all authors understand state capacity in the same way. This could be paradoxical, since a fragile state could be so according to a certain definition, but not according to another. The difference is relevant when studying the current Venezuelan case, which is so paradoxical as far as state capacities are concerned. It is clear that the economic, social and administrative debacle of contemporary Venezuela is not explained by a lack of resources, nor by the presence of particularly compromised situations or exceptional threats. It is still paradoxical that after having a very popular government between 2004 and 2012, as well as with revenues that multiplied during the decade of high prices of raw materials –allowing the considerable expansion of the size of

---

10 Migdal, *Estados débiles, estados fuertes*, 39-40.

11 Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011): XII.

12 Charles Tilly, *Democracia* (Madrid: Akal, 2010 [2007]): 23.

the State<sup>13</sup>–, the external debt has tripled, the country has ceased to be self-sufficient in terms of numerous food items, a long hyperinflationary cycle has broken out and a third of industrial companies have fallen<sup>14</sup>. Precisely when the State grew the most, the country's poverty figures rose above 80%, it experienced an almost absolute collapse in purchasing power, it became one of the two or three countries with the highest homicide rate in the world and saw almost 10% of its population emigrate. By the end of 2019, and since Nicolás Maduro assumed the presidency of the republic, Venezuela's GDP had contracted by more than 60%.

Consequently, it is evident that, on the one hand, there seems to be a strong State, insofar as it is not only highly capable of exercising the monopoly of legitimate/legal violence over the population and territory (in the Hobbesian-Weberian sense), but also of altering the way in which society manages and distributes its resources, activities and interpersonal connections (in the sense described by Tilly), to the point that it seems to be expressly oriented towards that task, with a disposition that oscillates between the politically revolutionary and the vulgarly predatory. From these perspectives, the Venezuelan State would be one of high capacity.

On the other hand, there are also several dynamics that point rather towards an increasingly fragile State, especially if considered from the parameters of Modernity and democratic governance. Such dynamics are related to the generalized loss

---

13 There are currently an estimated 3 million public employees in a country with 30 million inhabitants.

14 Gerver Torres offers some revealing figures in *The Venezuelan Drama in 14 Charts*. Center for Strategic and International Studies (published on January 16th, 2019; retrieved on 11/04/19): <https://www.csis.org/analysis/venezuelan-drama-14-charts>

of sovereignty –verified both in the presence of a situation of “multiple sovereignty”<sup>15</sup> as in the overwhelming weight of foreign interference–, the progressive consolidation –apparently voluntarily implemented by the State leadership– of a system of criminal co-governance with a clear predatory vocation –as will be shown later on–, and the generalized collapse of infrastructure and public services. All this displays a general trend towards a weaker State –at least in *modern* terms–, less sovereign, more indifferent to the popular will and less capable of executing tasks that are not expressly oriented to perpetuate the hegemony of a power group. A group that, incidentally, seems to sacrifice the strictly state function of imposing a clear distinction between the legal and the moral by blurring with its actions the boundaries between the public and the private, the moral and the immoral, the legal and the illegal. There is no doubt that the impact of a situation like this on the idea of Venezuela as a nation and a national project is deep, traumatic and visible to society as a whole.

#### 4. Socio-demographic change and the crisis of the republican national identity

As a consequence of the progressive loss of democracy and the regime of freedoms, the centrality of oil rentism administered from the State and the capacities of the State from a modern and democratic point of view, Venezuela is currently

---

15 Charles Tilly defines a situation of “multiple sovereignty” as one in which two or more blocks have aspirations, incompatible with each other, to control the State, or to be the State. This occurs when the members of a previously subordinate community [...] proclaim their sovereignty or when groups that are not in power mobilize and constitute a bloc that manages to gain control of part of the State [...] and when a State is fragmented into one or more blocks, each of which controls an important part of it. In *European Revolutions, 1492-1992* (Barcelona: Crítica, 1996): 27-28.



subjected to profound socio-demographic changes. The impact –psychological, social, economic, cultural– of economic collapse and mass emigration on individuals and families is brutal. Phenomena that until now had been alien or unfamiliar to the vast majority of Venezuelans are proliferating, such as generalized impoverishment, the progressive paralysis of public services, the stagnation of institutional social assistance networks, prolonged hyperinflation, the loneliness of the elderly, prolonged and forced separation due to the circumstances, the adjustment of emigrants to new social environments... These were circumstances relatively unknown to our society, which seem to contravene the course of progress to which Venezuelans of the last century had become accustomed.

If we imagine, for example, the vital perspective and world view that characterizes a Venezuelan citizen born around the 20s or 30s, we will see that their adolescence and early youth coincide not only with the progressive transition from autocracy to democracy but also with a set of decades (between 1920 and 1980) during which Venezuela was the country with the highest GDP growth. During this period, a largely rural and depopulated country, under the control of men-at-arms, became the most vibrant and prosperous democracy in the region. It is almost natural that having gone through such life experiences, personal and national spirit and character are marked by optimism, affability and firm confidence in progress. Venezuela was, according to many, “the best country in the world”, and Venezuelans seemed convinced that we were not only capable but destined to do great things. It is precisely this firm conviction that has been severely affected in the last three decades, especially during the last 5 years in which

the hyperinflationary cycle and the largest number of migrants have concentrated<sup>16</sup>.

Such a national havoc has made a large part of society wonder –for the first time in decades– if democracy and progress are our inexorable national destiny or if, on the contrary, the Civil Republic constituted an ephemeral parenthesis in the history of a precariously constituted country. The national-republican identity has begun to be seriously compromised in ways that cannot be yet fully understood. In this sense, it is not difficult to perceive that while a chronic optimism has prevailed among the older generations, sometimes devoid of convincing reasons in the face of the overwhelming weight of the facts, there is a generalized skepticism among the younger generations, which is not always exempt from cynicism. Time has continued to pass, and as the tragedy furthers on, older generations begin to waver in their confidence, while the youngest are assuming the vital responsibilities that correspond to them as best they can, without counting on the support of a moderately functional country in order to achieve their dreams and initiatives.

An existential precariousness of such proportions is incompatible with a nation capable of prospering, which means that it is necessary to review our foundations and our identity. The circumstance is certainly dire, but it is also an opportunity for deep and far-reaching general reflection. In this regard, neither chauvinistic inertia nor indiscriminate importation of ideas looks like healthy habits. We need to understand the singularity of

---

16 According to Susana Raffalli, a nutritionist specializing in food security who works for Cáritas, 63% of Venezuelan migrants left due to hunger. *La Nación*, December 19, 2018 (retrieved 11/04/19). <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/el-mundo/susana-raffalli-el-63-de-los-migrantes-venezolanos-se-fueron-por-hambre-nid2203780>

our current drama in the midst of the universality of which it is also a part, with patience and dignity, with the utmost respect for plurality and with the necessary depth to inspire action. The aspects to rethink go far beyond a political strategy for the transition, and involve, among other things, a revision –not necessarily a dismantling– of the consolidated myths through which the nation sees itself. My personal opinion, in this sense, is that the course will not change as long as we continue to settle on certain pernicious myths on which the political culture operates that led us to the present impasse.

## **II. What we have now: the new rules of the political game**

Based on the losses mentioned, it is worth considering the establishment of new rules of the political game in Venezuela today. To the troubling dynamics that already existed in Venezuelan society –oil rentism, the clientelist political culture that revolved around the presidential election, the problems inherent in the political party system, our political myths–, Chavismo added a revolutionary and anti-liberal political project, which was to dismantle the foundations of the previous democratic regime in order to consolidate an authoritarian hegemony with a socialist orientation. After two decades, the dissolving effect of this project is so deep-rooted that the very integrity of the national State itself is compromised. Therefore, any effort to redemocratize the country that attempts to ignore the existence of these new rules of the game is destined to fail; hence the importance of seeking to characterize it.

## 1. Totalitarian logic and kleptocratic drift

At this point, no one questions the autocratic character of the Chavista regime. In the field of political science, most specialists indicate that Venezuela went from having a democratic regime to a hybrid regime or *competitive* authoritarianism around 2004, to later become, since 2016, an *hegemonic* authoritarianism. This last difference is important because it indicates that, from that moment on, the authoritarian regime has made the decision not to allow electoral competition in –at the very least– open, fair and free terms. Specifically, after the victory of the political forces integrated in La Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD) in the 2015 parliamentary elections, which allowed them to obtain two-thirds (2/3) of the seats in the National Assembly –with which the Constitution empowered them to shortly appoint an important part of the directives of the National Electoral Council (CNE) and the Supreme Court of Justice (TSJ)–, the Chavista regime made a momentous decision, difficult to reverse and with profound repercussions on the structure of the State: prevent, from that moment on, any possibility of political change by electoral means, assuming all the necessary political costs and rearranging its internal structure to achieve so.

Since then, the leaders of Chavismo have known how to solve all its internal divisions and external difficulties, resisting a new and formidable cycle of protests by Venezuelan society (2017), the increasingly serious sanctions of the United States and other western democratic nations, and the enormous diplomatic pressure that the recognition by more than 50 democracies of Juan Guaidó as the legitimate president of Venezuela has meant. In the same way, and given the factual impossibility of maintaining the colossal clientelistic system by which the State guaranteed almost

total management of the economy, the regime has not sacrificed economic control of the population, but instead implemented a disorderly dollarization that allows internal reoxygenation. Likewise, and given the collapse of the national oil industry –whereby oil income may end up being less than \$2 billion by the end of 2020–, Chavismo has chosen to finance itself through indiscriminate –and to a large extent criminal– mining, which is exercised along the so-called “*Arco Minero del Orinoco*”<sup>17</sup>.

However, despite the fact that the characterization of the regime as *hegemonic authoritarianism* is particularly useful to show the deterioration of a series of indicators by which modern liberal democracies are characterized, as well as to compare the Venezuelan case according to international standards, it does not seem sufficient to understand the specific type of authoritarian dynamics that have prevailed in our country, nor the substantial change that has taken place in its political economy. In other words, while the term in question helps us understand to what extent democratic institutions have stopped working in Venezuela, it does not directly help us understand the type of *autocracy* that has been brewing in the country. And it is at this point where, in order to understand the new rules of the game that have been imposed in the country, it is necessary to pay attention to the revolutionary, socialist and totalitarian nature that has characterized Chavismo, and which distinguishes it from other modalities of hybrid regimes that currently swarm the planet.

We will not delve too deeply into the description of the revolutionary and totalitarian features of the Chavista regime,

---

17 See, for example, the work of Crisis Group, “73 Report Latin America & Caribbean - Gold and Grief in the Venezuela’s Violent South”, February 28, 2019; and Antulio Rosales, “Venezuela’s Deepening Logic of Extraction”, *NACLA Report on the Americas* 49 (2): 132-135, 2017.

since we have dedicated several previous articles to this<sup>18</sup>. This paper will be limited to indicating that this particular character of the Bolivarian Revolution has generated a model of government and domination by which 1) the regime never consolidates institutional stability, but rather maintains everything subject to its permanent will for change, understood as a crusade against constituted reality and in favor of a never-achieved utopia; 2) there are no limits to this revolutionary will, which always acts with the purpose of accumulating more and more power, even outside the national territory; and 3) civil society is progressively subdued and disarticulated by the totalitarian regime, whose behavior always revolves around the constant rejection of the most elementary postulates of political liberalism. As a consequence of the foregoing, not only the institutional channels to settle the control of the State –a characteristic situation of all hegemonic authoritarianism– have been blocked, but the entire cultural, social and economic foundation that operates as a precondition for shaping the sovereign political will (*Politische Willensbildung*) in terms of a modern democracy<sup>19</sup> has been subjected to the

---

18 Miguel Á. Martínez Meucci, *Apaciguamiento. El referéndum revocatorio y la consolidación de la Revolución Bolivariana* (Caracas: Alfa, 2012); “La revolución iliberal venezolana y su política exterior”, *Análisis Político* 77, 1 (2013): 211-231; “Democracia Totalitaria: apuntes desde el caso venezolano”, in *El lugar de la gente. Comunicación, espacio público y democracia deliberativa en Venezuela*, comp. Carlos Delgado Flores (Caracas: Ediciones de la UCAB, 2014), 15-31; “La narrativa revolucionaria del Chavismo” (with Rebeca Vaisberg de Lustgarten), *POSTData* 19, 2 (2015): 463-506; “Totalitarismo, cleptocracia y pandemia: la encrucijada del poder en Venezuela”, *Democratización* 2, 6 (2020): 43-71.

19 Let us recall, thus, Lipset’s thesis on the social requirements of democracy. According to this thesis, modern democracy can hardly be implemented in societies that do not yet have certain basic elements that characterize cultural modernization. See Seymour M. Lipset, “Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy”, *American Political Science Review* 53 (March, 1959): 69-105.

punitive, dissolving and predatory action of the totalitarian logic that characterizes the Chavista regime.

This total absence of checks and balances to the totalitarian will/logic of domination that Chavismo has been exercising has reached the point of dismantling the typically modern legal-bureaucratic rationality under which the public institutions of our time operate, replacing it with a rather pre-modern rationality or, as expressed by Gisela Kozak, “ex-modern”<sup>20</sup>. In accordance with Arendt’s assertion on how totalitarianism ends up considering large contingents of the population *superfluous*<sup>21</sup>, Chavismo has simply been disregarding the State’s obligation of providing for the proper functioning of the infrastructure and public services, rather focusing on citizen control and on the state’s prerogative of the monopoly of violence. The responsibility inherent not only to the exercise of political representation in the sphere of democratic governance, but also to the purely factual and pragmatic need to maintain the functioning of the State apparatus, has disappeared.

In this way, Chavista totalitarianism does not manifest itself primarily as the perfection of social control through the State, but comes to disregard the State itself in its most conventional modern sense –as an entity that aspires to embody public morality and as an apparatus of public administration that responds to a rational-legal institutional logic– to rely on the pure domination and ravaging of the population. While the total absence of

---

20 “Las voces de la literatura que profundizan en la figura femenina en Venezuela”, report by José Ferrer, published in *El Diario / Medium*, November 6, 2019 (retrieved on 11/08/2020). <https://medium.com/@ElDiariodeCCS/las-voces-de-la-literatura-que-analizan-la-figura-femenina-en-venezuela-592fd3b1f127>

21 Hannah Arendt, *Los orígenes del totalitarismo* (Madrid: Alianza, 2006 [1948]).

controls over the totalitarian regime creates the ideal conditions for the depredation of public and private assets, as well as natural resources, the strictly criminal nature of such activity blurs the boundaries between what is legal and what is illegal –since it is systematically exercised by the state actors themselves– and leads the regime towards an increasingly kleptocratic or gangster logic<sup>22</sup>.

As a consequence of this progressive drift towards generalized criminal action, the very function of the monopolistic exercise of violence is even being delegated to organizations that, beyond the confused Chavista exercise of state authority –in the terms indicated by Migdal–, are clearly criminal. Although Chavismo has shared the classical totalitarianism tendency of generating a multiplicity of parastatal bodies, especially those of a paramilitary or parapolice nature, it has been degenerating towards cooperation with what some authors have called “criminal governance”<sup>23</sup>

---

22 See, for example: Paola Bautista, “Revolución Bolivariana y el desarrollo del Estado gangsteril en Venezuela”, in *Democratización* 1, 1 (2019): 50-75; Emili Blasco, *Bumerán Chávez. Los fraudes que llevaron al colapso de Venezuela* (Madrid: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015); Leonardo Coutinho, *Hugo Chávez, o espectro* (São Paulo: Vestígio, 2018); Douglas Farah and Caitlin Yates, “Maduro’s Last Stand. Venezuela’s Survival Through the Bolivarian Joint Criminal Enterprise”, *IBI Consultants, LLC and National Defense University (INSS)* (2019); Insight Crime, “Venezuela: A Mafia State?” (2018); John Polga-Hecimovich, “Organized crime and the State in Venezuela under Chavismo”, in *The Criminalization of States. The Relationship between States and Organized Crime*, eds. Jonathan Rosen, Bruce Bagley and Jorge Chabat (Lexington Books, 2019), 189-207; Moisés Rendón and Arianna Kohan, “Identifying and Responding to Criminal Threats from Venezuela”, *Washington: Center of Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)* (22 julio 2019).

23 Desmond Arias, “The Dynamics of Criminal Governance: Networks and Social Order in Rio de Janeiro”. *Journal of Latin American Studies* 38, (2016): 293-325.



or “crimilegal orders”<sup>24</sup>. Or, to be more precise, what has been established in Venezuela is, rather, a system or *regime of state-criminal co-governance* in which not only the State security forces participate, but also criminal gangs and mega gangs, armed collectives, guerrillas/foreign terrorist organizations and military contingents from foreign states<sup>25</sup>.

## 2. Extractive and predatory political economy

All this dynamic of control and plunder is based, as has been previously underlined, on the implementation of a new political economy. As long as the totalitarian and kleptocratic drift of the Chavista regime has led to a profound mutation of the character and function of State institutions, and as the natural functioning of a capitalist and democratic society –based on the exercise of free individual initiative, protected by respect for private property and the stability of the currency– is destroyed by a domination that does not recognize limits, where foreign partners usually linked to autocratic regimes participate, the relationship between effort, profit and respect for the law is completely corrupted. Thus, the economy ceases to be sustained by the productive, daily and legal action of ordinary citizens, and becomes dependent on the pure extraction of wealth that comes from the state-criminal plunder of the population and the territory, while the capacity to thrive or merely survive within such a system depends on the individual’s ability to maneuver and accommodate within it.

---

24 Markus Schultze-Kraft, “Órdenes crimilegales: repensando el poder político del crimen organizado”. *Iconos. Revista de Ciencias Sociales* 55, (2016): 25-44.

25 See Marcos Tarre, “Seguridad Ciudadana”, in Benigno Alarcón y Sócrates Ramírez (eds), *La consolidación de una transición democrática. El desafío venezolano III* (Caracas: UCAB Ediciones, 2018).

Despite the particular efforts that people make to survive this generalized collapse, the inability of citizens to defend themselves from the predatory and extractive will of state-criminal groups has become so remarkable and widespread that, in 30 years, the country went from having one of the highest per capita incomes in the region to experiencing malnutrition close to famine as well as to bringing about the greatest migratory crisis that the hemisphere remembers. These facts become particularly significant when viewed in the light of the claims of scholars such as Amartya Sen, who declares that great famines only occur in countries controlled by authoritarian or totalitarian regimes, and never in liberal democracies<sup>26</sup>.

Hence, the patterns of the conflict in Venezuela have begun to resemble more and more those of structurally precarious societies that, after the decolonization processes of the 20th century, saw the capacities of their states –which were often already quite dysfunctional and authoritarian due to their origins associated with colonial domination– deteriorate with disputes from various national sides. All too often these disputes involved the presence of revolutionary or counterrevolutionary movements backed by foreign powers whose post-colonial interests revolved around the possibility of controlling –in complicity with local elites– the extraction of raw materials. In other words, the political economy that has fueled such lingering conflicts in countries such as Ghana, Congo, Liberia, Mozambique or Somalia has often been commanded by highly corrupt and low-capacity States, in

---

26 Andrés Cañizález recalls Sen's remark (it is not difficult to find the causal connection between the existence of democracy and the absence of famines) and uses it when commenting on the current Venezuelan case. See "Famines and other crises: rereading Amartya Sen", *Prodavinci*, April 28, 2020 (retrieved on 01/08/2020). <https://prodavinci.com/hambrunas-y-otras-crisis-releyendo-a-amartya-sen/>

which the agendas of the struggles of the various groups that control different parts of the territory are deeply linked to foreign ideologies and powers that entice the armed conflict and maintain a purely extractive profile of the economy.

The foregoing is of the greatest importance if it is taken into account that, while it is common that nations that transition to democracy have economies that have been experiencing important processes of capitalist modernization<sup>27</sup>, protracted armed conflicts in the post-Cold War world tend to be concentrated in countries with essentially extractive and single-export economies. While economic modernization seems to accompany democratization processes, Venezuela's retreat towards more purely extractive stages or those typical of transnational organized crime indicates a structural dynamic that, rather, points in the opposite direction to democratization, understood as a much more complex process than the mere popular election of a new political authority.

### 3. The weight of the international impact, absence of sovereignty and national self-image

Considering this scenario, the role of the international community cannot be ignored. A purely national solution can hardly be sought when Cuban, Russian or Iranian agents are already operating in Venezuelan territory, as well as members of organizations such as the dissident FARC members of the peace process, the ELN or Hezbollah, or when a large part of the actions carried out by Juan Guaidó depends on the coercive capacity of the US government, or when there is a situation of multiple sovereignty whereby there are two heads of State, each recognized by more than 50 different nations. In circumstances

---

<sup>27</sup> Seymour M. Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy...", (1959).

like these, asserting that Venezuela continues to be a sovereign State may be nothing more than a pure understatement.

In this sense, a perspective of the national debacle that goes beyond the conjunctural events and a local vision will show us to what extent this tragedy emerges as a result of the general inability shown by our society, State and democratic regime to adapt to the great global trends of the last 40 years. There are, therefore, very strong links between our current situation and what is happening in the international arena, links that could have been handled more correctly had they been understood in time by most of our democratic leaders. In this sense, there is no doubt that Venezuela was one of the great winners of the region during the validity of the import substitution industrialization (ISI) model. While the predominant tendencies in the whole world bet on large and protagonist States for the promotion of development, our country had the best conditions to promote this model of government. Thus, and through the main political parties, the 20th century Venezuelan petro-state virtually shaped the type of society that eventually prospered in the country.

But the end of the Cold War and the end of the Soviet threat created conditions conducive to a more interconnected world, with more penetrable borders for the mobility of capital, goods and people. In the 1990s, when Venezuela had already been experiencing serious problems since the nationalization of its oil industry –as shown by the figures for productivity, GDP per capita and public debt as a percentage of annual GDP–, the country as a whole was deeply reluctant to adopt a more open and competitive economy. Most of its political class, business community and workers expressed repeatedly and mainly, both during the *Gran Viraje* and the *Agenda Venezuela*, their rejection of

the measures aimed at reducing and optimizing public spending. The most tangible example of this rejection is found in the arrival of Chavismo to power, as well as in the undeniable enthusiasm generated by its clientelistic and statist policies, while oil prices held up to the irresponsible pace that was imposed on public spending.

It cannot be forgotten that not only Venezuelans participated in the Chavista feast. The global revolutionary left, orphan of national references and support after the collapse of the Soviet Union, required reorganization to fight in the field of democracy, of that model of liberal democracy that after the Third Democratizing Wave (1975-1995) spread throughout most of the West. In this context, and after the difficult decade that the 90s represented for the anti-systemic left, it not only achieved in Chavismo a new benchmark for anti-imperialist and third world struggle, but, above all, it acquired the petty cash necessary to finance a good part of its hemispheric initiatives. Although the issue has not been fully investigated, the evidence available so far is enough to know that Chavismo has financed a large number of radical left political organizations in America, Europe and other continents, not to mention the way in which it has supported the Castro dictatorship. Organizations such as the São Paulo Forum, and more recently the Puebla Forum and the Progressive International, show the joint actions that these types of actors have been developing in various countries, where the clearest and most invariable of them is the protection that they insist on offering to the Venezuelan and Cuban dictatorships. To this day, when the Castro-Chavista influence is recognized in the crises experienced in democracies such as the Spanish, Chilean or Colombian –to mention only those cases in which the Chavismo partners have become more visible–, refusing to understand this

type of cooperation only does a disservice to the joint struggle that Western democrats must support for the recovery of democracy in Venezuela and Cuba, as well as for its defense in the rest of our countries.

In the midst of the above, the national self-image has been seriously affected. Today's Venezuela has seen how the myths around which it had articulated its idea of itself have gone into crisis. The myth of Bolívar and of the liberating nation, the idea of being the beacon of democracy in the region, the image of the affable, tolerant and progressive nation, the oil power, the great united family... All this is now replaced by a large-scale collective grief, by the growing awareness of our shortcomings, by our apparent inability to come to an agreement, by an intolerance that seemed forgotten, by a heritage and an economy in ruins, by a gigantic exodus that fractures us and forces us to face great difficulties in foreign lands. The challenges for citizen organization are now, if possible, higher than those we have known for more than a century, and it is no longer possible to continue acting as if nothing has happened. We must ponder over a turning point.

### **To conclude**

In the previous pages, I have attempted to profile the profound change that took place in the rules of the political game after two decades of the Chavista hegemony. As a conclusion, the ideas presented can be synthesized in the following points. In the first place, only now, after the great collapse, we begin to see that Venezuela is probably the biggest loser in the West in the globalization wave of the late 20th century, all a consequence of the deep statist vocation that the country developed for decades and of a political culture in which the intersectoral conflicts of society

were cushioned by the oil rent. Only now is it acknowledged that we must go in a direction similar to that rejected 30 years ago by the whole of Venezuelan society, a direction focused on carrying out political and economic reforms that would place the weight of progress and development on the civil society and not in the State, in order to avoid citizen submission to clientelistic logics that are always dangerous for democracy.

Secondly, the presence not only of a hegemonic authoritarianism, but also of a logic of totalitarian power that dissolves the social fabric and that becomes more and more gangster through the development of a State-criminal co-governance, has been translated in a political system that excludes the possibility of competing in democratic elections with any guarantee. If the party system during the 2004-2016 period corresponded to the classic profile of a hybrid regime or competitive authoritarianism –which gave the political opposition spaces to compete electorally with an autocratic regime that also accepts to be measured at the polls, although having illegitimate and antidemocratic advantages–, since that last year the system has been increasingly refined and shaped by the autocratic regime, which has thus manufactured a fit opposition (through repression, political persecution, disqualification of parties and candidates, and undue co-option of political cadres) that prevents any possible change in this way as long as the correlation of political forces in Venezuela does not change.

Thirdly, the foregoing implies that the legal-institutional no longer operates but as a crude facade of a political activity in which violence reigns. The State-criminal co-governance regime that currently operates in the country no longer expects to have the approval of the popular will expressed in an autonomous and free manner, and it even cares little about the appearance of

democracy, but simply guarantees the pragmatic acceptance of its hegemony by the population. From the logic of totalitarian-gangster power imposed by Chavismo, those who control the regime disregard the maintenance of the most elementary public services, reducing the prerogatives of the State to territorial control that allows the systematic plundering of the public and private wealth of the nation. The continued impact of this logic of power translates into a profound mutation of the nature of the State and its basic capabilities.

Fourth, the socio-demographic profile of the nation has been changing considerably as a consequence of the collapse of the capitalist economy, hyperinflation, malnutrition and emigration. Today's Venezuelan society is less free, less autonomous, sicker, older and more fractured than in previous decades. Instead of advancing on the path of development and cultural modernization, we have regressed. Therefore, we must bear in mind that the political struggle that we can wage in such conditions surely requires not only the proper diagnosis, but also the development of new skills.

Fifth, all aspects mentioned are reflected in a profound change in the political economy of the Venezuelan conflict. The country has gone from having a high-capacity petro-state to an increasingly precarious and violent state, unable to fully exercise sovereignty over the national territory. As the experiences of other countries show, purely extractive and predatory logics favor the disintegration of society and the nation as such, at the same time that they tend to perpetuate armed conflicts for territorial control.

Finally, all of the above is related to the massive and indiscriminate increase in foreign influence in Venezuelan affairs. Venezuela no longer operates as a sovereign State, but rather as a territory disputed by power groups that too often do not



respond to a formal institutional profile. As external influence is so prevalent, it is also possible to think that the way out of the historical predicament in which we find ourselves will require a maximum and effective cooperation between internal and external democratic forces.

The obvious existence of these new rules of the game –which could well be summarized, in turn, in a generalized retreat on the path of national modernization– leads to the following questions, which we will try to answer in a future installment: Is it feasible and convenient to reproduce the same model of democracy that worked during the Civil Republic, or must we innovate? Is it possible to use oil in the same way, or must we completely rethink the role of oil in our national life? Is Venezuelan society the same that functioned under the Puntofijo rules, or has it changed significantly? Is it possible to recover democracy in Venezuela by doing what was done in previous times, or should we think about designing new strategies and developing new capacities? Is this a purely national problem, or is it something more complex? Is it possible to recover liberal democracy by disregarding a solid scheme of cooperation between Western democrats, or is it necessary to form a common and transnational struggle front?

# Conclusions

This issue seeks to contribute to the understanding of the problems Venezuela faces and influence national and international public opinion. Each of the authors, from their own perspectives, offers diagnoses and proposals. On this occasion, we offered an added value: the vital testimony and intellectual reflection of Dagoberto Valdés.

Below we will specify four ideas that deserve to be developed in future editions and that show the intellectual and political effort to identify phenomena that are found in our daily lives.

1. **On “anthropological damage”:** “Anthropological damage” is a concept created and developed by Dagoberto Valdés. It identifies what is –perhaps– the direst consequence of any totalitarian system, because it refers to the intimate world of the human person. Although the concept has some features associated with the culture and specific temporality of the Cuban case, we must make an effort to identify its universal aspects in order to find antidotes that serve both countries. This initiative is FORMA's first multilateral effort, and it fills us with joy to be able to build bridges with those who for so long have suffered from the same wrongdoings that plague us.
2. **Transition and transformation:** The identification of the autocratic nature of Chavismo was followed by a series of reflections on the need for a “transition to democracy” in the country. Numerous investigations, proposals and reflections on the subject have been developed. Most of these initiatives reference transitions in Latin America in

the second half of the twentieth century. Although they offer key aspects to understanding the phenomenon, they deserve to be expanded. For this reason, we put the concept of *transformation* at the service of the country with the aim of extending the scope of political reflections and its practical dimension.

3. **State building dimensions:** Eventually, Venezuela will face the challenge of rebuilding the State. We propose that this challenge be faced with a sense of transcendence. Initiatives that address the quality of political society and the nation, which show symptoms of suffering that “anthropological damage” identified by Valdés, should be added to the technical tasks of the process. We do warn that if these aspects are left aside, we can run the risk of sinking in our aspirations for freedom and promoting new illiberal orders that maintain autocratic features.
4. **Transformative disposition:** Given the dimensions of the damage that the Chavista revolution has created, and based on the demands for transformation, we consider that it is convenient to cultivate in the political actors a disposition oriented towards the impulse of a systemic change that allows progress towards democracy in a stable, inclusive and sustained manner. This provision requires unity of purpose among the members of the political society and the construction of a joint vision of the country.

We thus conclude this edition, hoping that it contributes to the political debate.