

# Democratization



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# Venezuela: between authoritarian and democratic learning

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If democratic ideas can spread and people can learn tactics to overcome authoritarian regimes, then why cannot authoritarian regimes reciprocate and learn how to overcome democratic protests?<sup>1</sup>

Seeking and finding common features –whether many or just a few– between the political regime of Venezuela and those of countries as diverse as Cuba, Nicaragua, Russia and even China or Iran is no longer strange for us. It is not only interesting to find similarities in specific policies or certain organizational principles within their diversity; but also, and much more so, to behold the common learnings that these regimes have cultivated and shared, which have allowed them to prevail.

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1 Stephen Hall in *Can authoritarian regimes learn? The cases of Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia and Ukraine* (Tesis, MARES-Russian and East European Studies, University of Birmingham, 2014), 57, available in: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303250628\\_CAN\\_AUTHORITY\\_REGIMES\\_LEARN\\_THE\\_CASES\\_OF\\_BELARUS\\_KAZAKHSTAN\\_RUSSIA\\_AND\\_UKRAINE](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303250628_CAN_AUTHORITY_REGIMES_LEARN_THE_CASES_OF_BELARUS_KAZAKHSTAN_RUSSIA_AND_UKRAINE)

Taking two previous articles<sup>2</sup> as a general frame of reference, these pages explore the traits of authoritarian resilience of the Venezuelan regime, which can be analyzed as a result of learnings from national experience and, especially, from other international experiences and incidents. Once the environment and the conceptual approaches to autocratic learnings have been characterized, learned repertoires will be identified and characterized in order to finally explore some challenges for democratic relearning.

## 1. Revolutions, springs and tides: beyond coincidence

The political processes in which leaders elected under democratic, or potentially democratic, rule became agents of autocratization in their exercise of power multiplied within the first two decades of the 21st century. Such is the case of Venezuela, so widely referred to in the media and academic literature. These regimes proliferated amid a sustained global regression of democracies, developing a repertoire of strategies –such as goal setting, resource management and attention to critical relationships– to respond to pro-democratic, national and international pressures, warnings and persuasive incentives. Thus, they strengthened their capacity to resist and developed consolidation strategies. The recent evolution of studies on what characterizes and sustains contemporary authoritarianisms internationally can be considered, on the one hand, from the perspective of the common grounds with other international approaches to democratization processes and their initiation,

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2 “Democratización y resiliencia autoritaria: oportunidades del desafío y riesgos de la permisividad,” *Democratización* 1, no. 3 (2019): 87-115 and “La resiliencia autoritaria y la causa democrática venezolana: Recursos y asimetrías,” *Democratización* 2, no. 5 (2020): 4-30.

strengthening and consolidation in different moments. On the other hand, it is essential to consider them from what is specific and immeasurable to the promotion of democracy with authoritarian patronage<sup>3</sup>.

The first investigations about foreign impact on democratization processes granted it little importance and considered it as always mediated by national actors. Later, it was understood as direct and decisive influence, and, finally, as complex processes of democratic influence acting through initiatives that combined internal and external interests. The analysis of the wave of autocratization that was spreading in the post Cold War period incorporated with increasing refinement the role of national actors in terms of their international connections, the environment of democratic recession and the more or less visible incidence of authoritarianism in its desire to protect and strengthen itself through the development of international affinities and support. Now, specifically, the persistence of authoritarianisms has also meant defensive learning from the experiences of democratizing advances that have displaced autocratic governments, and offensive learning from the containment and repression of democratic opponents, from the erosion of democratic practices and institutions, internal and external, and from the strengthening of their hold on power. If the former has been learned from the so-called “Color Revolutions”, the latter has been learned from the “Arab Spring” experience. The so-called Latin American “Pink Tide”, between the first decade of this century and the beginning

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3 Christian von Soest, “Democracy prevention: The international collaboration of authoritarian regimes”, *European Journal of Political Research* 54 (2015): 623–638. Available in: <https://ejpr.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1475-6765.12100>

of the second, combines the two facets in its peculiarity, and Venezuela holds a central role in both.

It is convenient to dwell on these three sets or waves of events that have been inspiring studies and methodological refinements on autocratic learnings since the beginning of the 21st century.

The Color Revolutions, which took place between 2000 and 2010 in the periphery of Russia –between Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the Caucasus<sup>4</sup>– had a finely complex balance. The *Bulldozer* revolutions in Serbia (2000) with the *Otpor* movement, the Rose revolution in Georgia (2003) with the *Kmara*, Orange with the *Pora* in Ukraine (2004) and the Tulips with the *Kelkel* in Kyrgyzstan (2005) were all successful. Instead, the movements of Armenia, Moldova, Uzbekistan, the *Yox* of Azerbaijan and the *Zubr* of Belarus failed. Those who achieved significant political changes had external support, which deserve to be observed regarding learnings: such as the impulses for democratic diffusion and the responses from the interests in authoritarian preservation encouraged by Russia. Indeed, Moscow argued there was Western interference in order to deny the national reasons for the chain of protests in ex-communist spaces, which had in common the domestic demand for compliance with constitutional rules. On the other hand, the conjunction of the external with the internal was present in the environmental conditions that encouraged the different revolutions<sup>5</sup>: States whose performance was perceived

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4 Larry Diamond, "Authoritarian Learning: Lessons from the colored revolutions", *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 12, no. 2, (2006): 215-222. Available in: [https://www.jstor.org/stable/24590631?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/24590631?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents)

5 Valery Solovei, "Color Revolutions and Russia," *Democracy in a Russian Mirror*, ed. Adam Przeworski (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 78-94. Available in: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/>

by the elites and the general population as inefficient and unfair, as well as the development of fraudulent elections which led to protests; elites' resistance to support the regime, preferring to search for alternatives to solve the political crisis; economic difficulties due to deterioration of living conditions or unsatisfied expectations of progress; alliance between part of the elites and the population against the regime; aspirations for justice and freedom that articulated actions against the government; and, finally, external influence, which did not manifest itself as a direct incidence but as a sociocultural influence and as a model –an inspiring image of almost all revolutions, except in Kyrgyzstan– no longer only from the democratic West but from the experiences of the “Velvet Revolutions” or the “fourth wave” between 1989 and 1991<sup>6</sup>.

In general, the internal social organization included the leading role of social movements and young people, mass non-violent protests linked to electoral processes (mostly against fraudulent elections), and demands for free and fair elections as a way to democratization.

The subsequent balance was not the best, due to the leaders' loss of power and organizations promoting change, due to failures in government performance and, not least important, due to the

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[aop-cambridge-core/content/view/ABEE0CE0F9250BF47F5AB4F516C5F087/9781107282070c4\\_p78-94\\_CBO.pdf/color\\_revolutions\\_and\\_russia.pdf](https://aop-cambridge-core/content/view/ABEE0CE0F9250BF47F5AB4F516C5F087/9781107282070c4_p78-94_CBO.pdf/color_revolutions_and_russia.pdf)

- 6 In a few months, between August and December 1989, there were the successive falls of the regimes of Poland, Hungary, the collapse of the Berlin Wall (and the following year the end of the German Democratic Republic with the union with Federal Germany), the end of communist regimes also in Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and Romania, followed by Albania in 1990, and by the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991 after the death of its unifier, Josip Broz Tito.

political and security reasons that mobilized the Russian regime. Thus, the geopolitics that played in favor of these revolutions turned against regimes that, aside from their internal performance deficiencies, failed to develop a *modus vivendi* with Moscow or between Russia and Europe or in any multilateral instance, nor effective alliances that compensated their ability to set in motion the strategic interests of the neighboring power. Its most violent manifestation took place years later and undoubtedly for very specific geopolitical and domestic reasons, which was the intervention of Ukraine followed by the annexation of Crimea.

In this process, studies on authoritarian learnings have conjectured about learning in the sequence of revolutions from the similarities in their development and organization. Those of the Russian regime have deserved special attention, disseminated to their allied regimes<sup>7</sup>. These lessons were translated into practice in restrictive and repressive measures against independent civil society and its organizations, as well as against the opposition, its parties and militants; in limitations on the freedoms and transparency of electoral powers and blockades of the presence of independent international electoral observers. This was accompanied by the delegitimization of the arguments and positions of the Color Revolutions and in the pro-democratic demonstrations and organizations. Pro-government demonstrations were organized to counteract opposition protests, as well as political, diplomatic and practical support offered to autocratic international allies. References to security threats from Color Revolutions instigated from the West were frequent, using

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7 Stephen Hall, "Can authoritarian regimes learn? The cases of Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia and Ukraine" (Presented for MARES Russian and East European Studies, University of Birmingham, 2014), 78-80.

intensive media and broadcast platforms under government control<sup>8</sup>.

About a decade later, between 2010 and 2012, there was a succession of protests in 16 countries in North Africa and the Middle East known as the Arab Spring. It was plagued with failures and sustained conflict with the exception of Tunisia: from the military coup that toppled Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, the brief electoral mandate of the Muslim Brotherhood government and the stabilization of the militarized regime that toppled him, to the protracted civil conflagrations and wars in Libya, before and after the overthrow of Muammar el Gaddafi, and in Syria the support of the Bashar al-Assad regime<sup>9</sup>. Electoral processes played very different roles in the stabilizations of Tunisia and Egypt. In Tunisia, where the sequence of protests began, the economic, political and religious problems that followed the resignation of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, two free elections and constitutional changes were resolved through institutional channels, although not exempt from fragility. The continuity of association agreements with the European Union and participation as an observer in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization affected the matter as external incentives for the political and economic stability of this country. On the other hand, in Egypt, after overthrowing the democratically elected government of Mohamed Morsi, General Abdel Fatah al Sisi legitimized his power electorally in 2013 and in

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8 Krišjānis Bušs, "Russia Stirs Fear of Color Revolutions," in *Democracy Speaks* (International Republican Institute Blog, 2019). Available in: <https://www.democracyspeaks.org/blog/russia-stirs-fear-color-revolutions>; Stephen Hall, "Can authoritarian regimes learn? The cases of Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia and Ukraine" (Presented for MARES Russian and East European Studies, University of Birmingham, 2014), 81-82.

9 Tarek Masoud, Andrew Reynolds, Jason Brownlee, "Tracking the `Arab Spring`: Why the Modest Harvest?," *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 4 (2013): 29-44.



March 2018 he was re-elected, although through another a shady process, protested by the opposition, with low participation, but with no significant international democratic response.

The rapid spread of the protests from Morocco to Bahrain has generally been analyzed based on economic and socio-political commonalities, as well as considering the spreading of the phenomenon between societies facilitated by the rapid diffusion of ideas, discourses and practices, which meant adaptations and applications that exhibited remarkable similarities. While the sequence and repertoire of protests and demands for socio-political changes manifested democratic diffusion or contagion, an aspect less studied has been the development of a governmental repertoire of responses that reflected the lessons learned from the experience of previous countries. Adjustments to its resources and means to the dynamics of the protests and the direction of regional and international trends were evidenced<sup>10</sup>.

From the authoritarian repertoire disseminated at the time, the following guidelines and measures have been highlighted<sup>11</sup>: Preventing internal divisions in the regime, especially in the military sector; Entrusting repression to proven loyal forces and improving economic conditions to key military actors; Developing and disseminating messages aimed at affecting the strategic calculations of citizens who would participate in protests to increase their fears, warning of the costs and personal risks as well as the negative consequences –violence, disorder, economic destruction– of displacing the government; Applying strategies in the fields of diplomacy and international security supporting

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10 Steven Heydemann & Reinoud Leenders, "Authoritarian Learning and Authoritarian Resilience: Regime Responses to the «Arab Awakening»", *Globalizations* 8, no. 5 (octubre 2011):647-653.

11 Taken from Heydemann & Leenders, 649-650.

counterrevolutionary actors and discouraging the expression of criticism and punitive measures from external adversaries; Monitoring the fate of their ousted regional counterparts to assess the likelihood of negotiating an exit strategy that would ultimately offer amnesties and thus partial withholding of accumulated assets. Besides, related regional regimes converged, by March 2011, around measures to increase their likelihood of permanence, recognizing the weight of nearby key actors (Saudi Arabia and Iran) in the uneven results of the protests in Syria and Bahrain, in the use of the resistance of the United States to intervene and, particularly after the experience in Libya, in the stopped actions of the members of NATO, the powers and the Security Council, the discursive framing of the protests as generators of chaos (Fitna), the strategic calculations in the use of repression to keep it within thresholds that would not increase the international costs of repression and, finally, the analysis of the possibility of developing acceptable exit strategies that gradually lost interest after measures were taken to displace leaders.

Moreover, to clarify the approach of authoritarian learning and bring it closer to the Venezuelan case, in the heterogeneous Latin American “pink tide” there are diffusion elements. This tide, of various reddish tones depending on the degree of political antiliberalism and economic nationalization, showed itself with the successive elections of Hugo Chávez (1999), Alberto Kirchner (2003), Evo Morales and Manuel Zelaya (2006), and Daniel Ortega (2007); on another scale Luiz I. Lula da Silva (2003), Fernando Lugo (2008) and Rafael Correa (2009), as well as more lightly Tabaré Vázquez (2005), Mauricio Funes (2009) and Ollanta Humala (2011); outside of the tide, with barely a pragmatic relationship with it, Michele Bachelet (2009).

At least three contrasting features of this set should be noted –which due to its heterogeneity and duration was not configured or consolidated as a “wave”– in relation to the conditions of authoritarian learnings extended from the sequences in the Russian periphery and in North Africa and the Middle East. First, these political processes in Latin America were a critical answer to the performance of democracies, in an unequal balance between the demand for efficiency and that of re-founding its legitimacy. The government of Hugo Chávez increasingly and openly positioned itself at the extreme of illegitimacy and national and international neglect of fundamental democratic principles, agreements and commitments. Furthermore, it actively took on the task of internationally encouraging their weakening and neglect. The second distinguishing feature is the geographical proximity to a democratic power and to countries in which democracy –at least in terms of the possibility of alternation and legislative counterweights– was demonstrating its resilience. This has been the case in Paraguay, Argentina, Brazil, Argentina, Peru, El Salvador, Ecuador and Bolivia since 2013. Thirdly, there is a primordial and great learning process in countries that more extremely abandoned democratic principles and practices, which was to promote the people’s protagonism and participation –in elections and consultations– yet increasingly restricted pluralism, the democratic legitimacy of the exercise of power, and ultimately degraded the electoral moment itself (e.g. Venezuela, Nicaragua and Bolivia).

In Venezuela, the lessons for the maintenance and consolidation of an increasingly closed authoritarian regime have become more visible. With the arrival of Hugo Chávez to power, there has been a well-known journey by which purposes, strategies and policies were outlined, which alienated the nation from other

democratic actors and commitments and brought it closer to alliances and strategic links which not only diversely challenged the international liberal order but legitimized authoritarianism in its most extreme versions, that finally gave way to national autocratization. Amid growing national and international pressures for the restoration of democracy, strategies and policies were acquired to overcome pressures and regain sustainability. Such learnings came from their own experiences, before and during the governments of Chávez and Maduro, and from other people's repertoires, as has been the advice of the Cuban regime expressly invited and admitted. They have been a fundamental influence, but not the only school, as the lessons sketched from the Color Revolutions and the Arab Spring suggest. Before exploring the autocratic learnings in the Venezuelan case, with special reference to Cuba, it is convenient to introduce some details about this approach, its limitations and possibilities.

## **2. Autocratic learnings and repertoires: Venezuela**

The three sets of cases introduced in the previous section offer relevant examples to approach the question of learnings in general and specifically in regards to the Venezuelan case, which, as previously indicated, incorporates both useful learning in the face of democratizing pressures, as well as its complement in learning to encourage an international environment favorable to authoritarian permanence. Furthermore, and of the utmost importance, they are useful references to assess democratic learnings and adjust their repertoires.

## Imitation, adaptation and innovation of repertoires

Successful strategy and policy innovation in one state<sup>12</sup> often encourages adoption in other states or at another time within the same state<sup>13</sup>. Learning refers to the emulation or adaptation of innovations in ideas, methods and policy solutions on the basis of its legitimacy or efficacy, usually a degree of both in different proportions. Then there is the issue of how a nation learns from its own successes and failures and internationally from what it believes it should emulate or avoid and what it should innovate or adapt to<sup>14</sup>. It is equally interesting and relevant to consider the promoters and carriers of the ideas and strategies, whether people, groups or more or less institutionalized organizations, through links and influence on leaders and governments.

The so-called means or mechanisms that contribute to international autocratic learnings have included: the **diffusion** or effect of contagion or imitation, **collaboration** with elites, **pressure** through negative and positive incentives that the state exerts on the elites seeking to adopt support measures or authoritarian

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12 Cecilia Osorio & José M. Vergara, "La difusión de políticas públicas. Estado del arte y contribuciones para la disciplina en América Latina," *Revista de Ciencia Política* 54, no. 2 (2016): 235-254. Available in: <https://revistapolitica.uchile.cl/index.php/RP/article/view/44806/46883>

13 Rachel Varderhill, "Learning to Be Bad: How Autocratic Leaders Adopt Strategies from Abroad to Maintain Power" (Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, New Orleans, 2012). Available in: [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2108791](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2108791)

14 Stephen Hall, *Developing the Concept of Authoritarian Learning* (Thesis presented in the MRES Politics and Economics of Eastern Europe, 2015). Available in: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303250392\\_Developing\\_the\\_Concept\\_of\\_Authoritarian\\_Learning#fullTextFileContent](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303250392_Developing_the_Concept_of_Authoritarian_Learning#fullTextFileContent)

consolidation<sup>15</sup>. Additionally, the idea of contagion has been refined through the consideration of interactions, **linkages** with authoritarian actors that have **leverage**<sup>16</sup>. The notion of pressure has advanced to include the use of **soft power** by those authoritarian actors that, in their increasingly characteristically authoritarian version, are then considered **sharp power**<sup>17</sup>, a kind of “anti-democratic toolbox”<sup>18</sup> or “manipulation menu”<sup>19</sup> containing policies and practices aimed at weakening and displacing democratic institutions and practices. **Learning**, which is one of the forms of dissemination of authoritarian policies and tools or repertoires, and the concept that fundamentally concerns

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15 Rachel Varderhill, “Learning to Be Bad...” and *Promoting Authoritarianism Abroad* (Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 2015).

16 Based on the concepts that, were introduced by Steven Levitsky & Lucan A. Way to explain the strategies of maintenance of competitive authoritarianisms in “The rise of competitive authoritarianism,” *Journal of Democracy*, 13, no. 2 (2002): 51-56; *Competitive Authoritarianism. Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

17 The means of soft power are public diplomacy, radio broadcasts, exchange programs, economic, technical and military assistance, counseling, support in emergency situations, cultural promotion and links with civil society: Joseph Nye, “Soft Power”, *Foreign Policy*, no. 80 (1990): 153-171 and *The Future of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011). For sharp power, these are accompanied by more invasive and technologically developed resources to contribute to social and political control: Christopher Walker & Jessica Ludwig, “The Meaning of Sharp Power. How Authoritarian States Project Influence”, *Foreign Affairs* (noviembre, 2017). Available in: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-16/meaning-sharp-power>

18 Christopher Walker, “Dealing with the Authoritarian Resurgence”, en *Authoritarianism Goes Global. The Challenge to Democracy*, ed. Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner & Christopher Walker (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016).

19 Andreas Schedler, “Elections Without Democracy: The Menu of Manipulation”, *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (2002): 36-50.

this paper, can be incorporated in their development of emulation and adaptation to all or some of these media<sup>20</sup>.

Most importantly, ultimately, strategies and tactics are adopted to resist and impose, learned to sustain, defend and strengthen the regime. Investigating this matter in Venezuela is a larger-scale task for at least two reasons. First, because there have been many authoritarian influences that could inspire –sometimes explicitly but operationally with extreme opacity– policies and responses to critical situations for the maintenance of the regime, situations that would require a detailed analysis of the government discourse and its most influential international counterparts at different times<sup>21</sup>. Some examples of this are the insistence on approaches, unconditional openings, and expressions of affinity of policies and orientations with authoritarian regimes near and far, geographically and culturally, as well as the praises of their methods of government and the invitations to advisers. Its study involves analyzing policy formulations but also documenting links to specify what is materialized in agreements, decisions and practices. Second, because critical moments have abounded, each of which merits in-depth studies on the manifestations of identification with the policies or orientations of related individuals, organizations or governments, as well as on their effective adoption.

What has been learned: what and from whom

To observe what has been learned, some critical moments for the Venezuelan government can be explored, and there

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20 Cecilia Osorio & José M. Vergara, “La difusión de políticas públicas” ...

21 The repertoires summarized in the previous section as learnings from the Color Revolutions and the Arab Spring have become increasingly familiar to Venezuelans.

search for manifestations of identification with repertoires of resilience used by authoritarian regimes in relation to a set of critical variables, in the transition from hybridity from electoral authoritarianism to hegemonic and closed authoritarianism. Respectable international indexes that have registered this transit in Venezuelan include among their criteria evaluations on the integrity of electoral processes, separation of powers, government performance, guarantee of civil and political liberties, pluralism and participation. The already outlined repertoires against the opposition movements of the Color Revolutions and the Arab Spring, which are quite familiar to Venezuelans, were generators of authoritarian know-how in times in which the international and national conditions favored democratic diffusion. Whether analyzed at a distance from those events or by the links that were developed and maintained with the governments of Russia and Iran<sup>22</sup>, their influence has become particularly relevant since national and international pressure increased through sanctions,

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22 Vladimir Rovinski, "Russian-Venezuelan Relations at a Crossroads" (Woodrow Wilson Center, 2019), available in: [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/russia-venezuela\\_report\\_rouvinski\\_final.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/russia-venezuela_report_rouvinski_final.pdf); "Russia's Continuing Engagement with Venezuela in 2019 and Beyond - An Update" (Woodrow Wilson Center, 2019), available in: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/Russia%E2%80%99s%20Continuing%20Engagement%20with%20Venezuela%20in%202019%20and%20Beyond%20-%20An%20Update.pdf>; John E. Herbst & Jason Marczak, "Russia's Intervention in Venezuela: What's at Stake?" (Atlantic Council Policy Brief, septiembre 2019), available in: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Russia-Venezuela-Policy-Brief.pdf>  
Joshua Chang, "A Tale of Two Rogue States: The Iran-Venezuela Partnership" (Georgetown Security Studies Review, julio 2020), available in: <https://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2020/07/19/a-tale-of-two-rogue-states-the-iran-venezuela-partnership/>



as it affects the three countries to different degrees and has made them increasingly challenging vis-à-vis the United States.

To draw a general overview of learning, within the limits of what is covered in this analysis, some of the accumulated learning around four critical moments or circumstances for the regime and for the democratic cause of Venezuela can be summarized.

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### **Challenging moments / Learnings, repertoire**

#### **From the coup of April 2002 to the recall referendum of 2004**

- Appeasement of international and national democratic actors.
- Acceptance of the presence of international facilitators within the framework of the Inter-American Democratic Charter.
- Intensive use of material and institutional resources to evade compliance with the measures agreed upon at the negotiating table and agreements, and defer the socio-political conditions of the constitutional referendum on the revocation of the presidential mandate in their favor.
- Encourage international anti-liberal and anti-imperialist polarization. Approach challenging actors of the *status quo* and support political movements and organizations prone to the dissemination of critical ideas and practices of opposition to the essential institutions of representative democracy and its international protection.

#### **From the definition of a “new strategic map” in 2004 and the defeat of the constitutional reform in 2007 to the referendum on re-election in 2009**

- Advances in public control of the media aimed at achieving the so-called “communicational hegemony.”
- Restrictions to the financing of civil society organizations.

- Organization of pro-government demonstrations in parallel to calls for protests.
- Refusal to accept independent international electoral observation missions and human rights evaluation missions.
- Disqualification of the results of the defeated referendum to reform the Constitution. Call, despite constitutional limits, for another consultation to allow indefinite reelection.
- Promotion of alternative international forums, withdrawal of integration agreements, and increased political tension with the United States.
- Changes in the security doctrine, beginning of the purchase of weapons from Russia. First financial agreements with China.

**From the opposition unification, its strengthening and mobilization, to the succession of Chávez by Maduro and the escalation of repression and violence against the protests from 2014 to 2017**

- Degradation of electoral conditions.
- Factual ignorance of the powers of the National Assembly after losing the ruling majority in the 2015 elections.
- Sequence of disqualifications, arrest, political asylum and exile of opposition deputies.
- Increasing violent repression of citizen protests.
- Political instrumentalization of opportunities for dialogue with the opposition at critical moments (2014-2015; 2016-2017), with the presence of international facilitators considered acceptable by the regime.

- Ignorance and withdrawal of international commitments to protect democracy and human rights.

**From national and international democratic pressures  
and the negotiations of 2017-2018 and 2019**

- Maintenance and diversification of the forms of repression and social control.
- Taking advantage of dialogues and negotiations in search of time and pressure reduction and, since mid-2017, the lifting of sanctions.
- Development of geopolitically challenging and legally illegal links and procedures to evade the effects of sanctions. Closer relations with Iran and Turkey.
- Calling and holding elections for a Constituent Assembly in 2017 and for a President in 2018, in breach of constitutional and electoral integrity standards.
- Call for parliamentary elections under conditions imposed by the Supreme Court to favor official control of the National Assembly, including the intervention of the largest political parties.

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Policies such as these illustrate the accumulation of learnings in an environment of democratic recession in which, despite the reduction in geopolitical room for maneuver compared to the first decade of the century, Venezuelan authoritarianism has maintained a network of authoritarian linkages and leverages from which it has emulated and adjusted policies such as those outlined above in matters as important as the rule of law and the separation of powers, pluralism, electoral integrity, the party system and civil society, the protection of human rights and freedom of expression.

Within the complexities that should be recalled about determining the sources and modalities, links and incidence that favor autocratization and the preservation of the Venezuelan regime, the sequence of accumulation of learning can be associated with certain relationships in which Chávez's personal affinities were as diverse as they were substantively difficult to document<sup>23</sup>, as was the selection of his advisers on economic and strategic matters, or his affinities with the Sao Paulo Forum. Determining what and how much of what was advised was assimilated to the repertoire of the so-called Bolivarian revolution exceeds the purposes of this essay, but it is possible to estimate the sequence of learning, especially linked to relations with Cuba.

From the first moment, without a doubt, there is the strengthening between 2002 and 2004 of the alliance formalized with Cuba in 2000 –significantly important in defining the terms of Chávez's succession and for the orientation of Maduro's management– and the expansion of the terms of cooperation that was advancing and penetrating strategic sectors. The evolution of the closeness between the two regimes has been understood in three phases in which the learnings of the Venezuelan regime were meshed with the Cuban model<sup>24</sup>.

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23 E.g., close and simultaneous relationships were maintained with Norberto Ceresole, even longer with Fidel Castro, with regimes such as those of Gaddafi, Al-Ássad or Robert Mugabe, as well as expressions of sympathy and rapprochement with the leadership of the Colombian guerrilla –at each end of the political spectrum but all undemocratic and encouraging of the totalitarian vocation. All of them speak of the openness to such influences and advice from very early on in the Chávez government project.

24 Periodization is very resourcefully stated for the purpose of identifying learning themes by Bryan Fonseca & John Polga-Hecimovich in "Venezuela and Cuba: The Ties that Bind, I. Two Nations, One Revolution: The Evolution of the Contemporary Cuba-Venezuela Relations" (Wilson

Shortly after Chávez came to power, having visited Cuba before in 1994 and expressed his admiration for the Cuban revolution, which he said should be emulated, and for Fidel Castro himself, who would become a close companion and mentor, there was an agreement on energy cooperation and in other areas that was to reach unprecedented breadth and opacity. In 2002, after the coup that displaced Chávez from power for just over a day, Castro's support and advice encouraged greater rapprochement and cooperation in intelligence, as well as the promotion of a strategy to overcome the political crisis, between the process of negotiations with international facilitation, the development of social programs with advice and Cuban presence, and the measures to delay the holding of the recall referendum of the presidential mandate until 2004. At the end of this year –celebrating a decade of the 1994 meeting– Castro and Chávez signed an even broader cooperation agreement in Havana and founded the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) for those with ideological affinities, which would be complemented the following year by oil agreements, financed for Venezuela, useful to win support and votes without the need for ideological agreement in the Caribbean. Between 2004 and 2013, Cuba's influence and opportunities for learnings and their application increased markedly as the challenge to the United States grew. Progress was being made in the nationalization of the economy, the politicization of the Armed Forces, and the advice and Cuban presence in the areas of intelligence, communications, training and security planning. Despite the succession of Fidel Castro by his brother Raúl, the death of Chávez and the financial limitations of Venezuela since 2013 to maintain the previous levels

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Center, 2020). Available in: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/Venezuela-Cuba%20FINAL.pdf>

of economic support for Cuba, the arrival of Nicolás Maduro to power did not diminish mutual dependence. It was felt with intensity in Venezuela through the use of violence on scales hitherto unknown to quell 2014 protests, through the concentration of economic activities in military hands, and through the degradation of electoral processes to distort the value of the vote and the right to choose. This was revealed both in the convocation and election of an unconstitutional Constituent Assembly and in the presidential one in May 2018. Internationally, the withdrawal from the OAS, the disqualification and abandonment of bodies of scrutiny and evaluation in human rights, the search for Support for authoritarian powers and tolerance for disrespecting international institutions are, at least, similarities between both foreign policies. However, there is an enormous difference regarding the professional institutional management of Cuban diplomacy and its ability to combine challenge with negotiation.

This alliance was joined from the first years by the approaches to similar regional movements and forums, to authoritarian and defiant international actors of the international liberal order in the Middle East and Africa, always ready to disqualify the institutions and practices of representative democracy and to applaud any initiative that would threaten it –or even the guarantees of human rights– in the name of social justice or political resentment.

In its different phases, relations with Russia, Iran and China –with the important variations derived from their international priorities and strategies– have also been carriers of learnings and resources to materialize them. They have encouraged changes in doctrine, strategies and equipment for public safety and the repression of protests, the use of propaganda and the media under state control, the dissemination and manipulation of information

in networks and through informational agencies, in defiance not only of democratic powers but also of principles, norms and institutions of international law. They have also been important for the strategy of evasion of sanctions and the authoritarian instrumentalization of discussions and proposals in international forums.

There have been other sources of learning, of even more complex study but unavoidable mention, such as those derived from relationships and influences that have been cultivated in the illicit, criminal and subversive, all linked to corruption in its broadest sense: from the breath and participation in the appropriation of public goods and those derived from illicit activities, to the acceptance of those activities and administration of impunities. Not surprisingly, corruption, and not only inefficiency, is characteristic and easily learned and shared between regimes in which the separation of powers disappears.

After this succinct exploration, it is unavoidable to wonder about the quality of autocratic learnings as sources of resilience. That quality refers to both its legitimacy and its efficiency<sup>25</sup>. Regarding the former, the list of authoritarian learnings and their extreme manifestations have made the Venezuelan regime an anti-model and, in another sense of legitimacy, that of acceptance, it has basically obeyed reasons of political and geopolitical calculation nationally and internationally, so that expediency has displaced convictions. Effectiveness, on the other hand, varies depending on how it is measured. It will be considered effective due to its ability to stay in power during the last two decades, but

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25 Thomas Ambrosio, "Authoritarian Norms in a Changing International System", *Politics and Governance* 6, no. 2 (2018): 120-123. Available in: <https://www.cogitatiopress.com/politicsandgovernance/article/view/1474/1474>

ineffective in its balance of accumulated costs and risks, which are projected as vulnerabilities inside and outside the country, and as sources of instability for the regime.

The Venezuelan model is no longer the object of imitation and authoritarian learning –together with the environment, the relationships and influences in the midst of which they have developed. They have not managed to stifle or hide the fact that domestic and international democratic resistance remains. This other face of resilience, even in times of democratic recession, suggests both the permanence of democratic learning and concern about the need for its innovation and diffusion.

### **3. Finally: the challenges of democratic relearning**

If the study of learnings that contribute to the diffusion and resilience of authoritarianisms emerged as a challenge at the beginning of this essay, after its general characterization, it is pertinent to think about what the balance of these learnings means as a challenge to the Venezuelan democratic cause.

It is worth returning to the issue of the effectiveness and legitimacy of autocratic learnings in times in which the Venezuelan regime has become a hindrance in both dimensions, but with the risk that the urgency of effective solutions encourages a transition to some other authoritarian modality and is granted national and international legitimacy<sup>26</sup>. Thus, the first democratic challenge is to properly diagnose the moment and the government's repertoires, taking into account the risks of moving away from rationality

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26 Stephen Krasner "Learning to Live with Despots. The Limits of Democracy Promotion", *Foreign Affairs* (marzo-abril, 2020). Available in: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2020-02-10/learning-live-despots>



to those induced by extreme stress in the midst of a situation as critical as the Venezuelan one<sup>27</sup>.

In short, the challenges of democratic learning refer not only to a collection of repertoires or a toolbox, but to the orientations towards internal and external relations and institutions. This involves the entire population, but especially the leading elites who hold representation and control, administer, decide and who play a very important role.

In human and humanitarian terms, a fundamental part of the initial challenge of democratic learning is to recover and strengthen the valuation and effectiveness of citizen and institutional, national and international means, for the comprehensive protection of human rights, addressing the extreme precariousness of Venezuelans.

Regarding the need for the national recovery of the rule of law and democracy, the appreciation of Venezuelans for the right to vote, which the polls continue to show, is fertile ground for the evaluation of their defense and demand for the necessary reinstitutionalization. Respect for the electoral moment, so depreciated by authoritarianism, is an essential part of what must continue to be valued and defended, starting with the real possibility of alternation. Surveillance over the exercise of government, which must be subject to institutional checks and balances, with full guarantee of political rights, has opened up space even amid strong regulations and measures of intimidation and repression, but must be converted into citizen awareness of

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27 Kurt Weyland has contributed to the study of learnings in “counter-diffusion” processes, warning against the limitations of rationality: *Revolution and Reaction. The diffusion of Authoritarianism in Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

institutionalized demand for accountability. To the traditional democratic learning of a national order, even more international efforts should be added such as measures of scrutiny, evaluation, recommendations, solidarity and follow-up in matters that are part of the international protection of democracy, including transparency and comprehensive observation of electoral processes.

If the valuation and effective practice of pluralism are important in dealing with a complex national agenda, autocratically fed with temptations to polarize and fragment, something similar is happening internationally. Democratic learning advises, for reasons of legitimacy and efficiency, to avoid becoming part of polarization exercises and to stick to assessing links and incidence in harmony with the orientations and aspirations, needs and interests of Venezuelan society. To this end, it is important to recover the valuation of principles, norms and practices of international law that regulate relations between States and support the establishment of spaces for coordination and cooperation that help balance and set limits to power relations.

Despite the twenty years that have passed in the midst of the increasingly harsh authoritarian imposition, not only are there persistent signs of democratic tendencies, but new learnings have been incorporated, and foreign encouragement urges those pillars to be sustained and strengthened in an extremely complex circumstance, with obstacles and demands. Knowing this is not enough to achieve the desired end: it is necessary to innovate by learning from the democratization experiences of other countries, but recognizing the political specificities of the case, the seriousness of its social drama and the risks of authoritarian geopolitization to which it is exposed. All of this is forcing, but

also encouraging, to strengthen convictions, to diagnose needs and to update democratic repertoires.

## Conclusions

One of the purposes of *Democratization* is to manifest our intellectual work and contribute to the national and international political debate. Those of us who work in this editorial project are historically woken and, with humility, we place our reflections and findings at the service of all. Frequently, when studying other political processes, I value with special admiration the stories of those who stopped to think “on the spot” about the reality that they had to live. These documents have been especially helpful to me in discovering the social and political humor of complex and sobering moments. I am sure that the time will come when it will be necessary to study the Venezuelan political process and I hope that this initiative will contribute to such purposes.

This issue includes articles that follow up on two topics that we identified as important in previous issues and that deserve our attention: the concepts of "autocratic learning" and "transformation". The first refers to the path of authoritarian improvement that the Chavista revolution has crossed since 1998. It describes the accumulation of experiences that has allowed it to grow in resilience and overcome deep crises. Recognizing these dynamics can allow to anticipate decisions and reactions with the aim of disturbing the comfort of a regime that looks like teflon, because everything is slipping. The longevity of the Chavista dictatorship forces us to continue delving into this issue. I can see that it will be necessary for the medium term to precisely analyze the political process that began on January 23, 2019, to see what the regime has learned during this period. There remains a debt in intellectual analysis and in the exercise of politics: democratic

learning. It will also be convenient to stop and ponder over what this struggle has taught those of us who resist the dictatorship.

The second concept is that of transformation. In Venezuela, people started talking about transition in 2014. The massive protests that took place in the country that year introduced the term to public opinion. Seven years separate us from that moment and we have not yet managed to achieve political change. Defining when a transition starts is a complex task. There are seldom milestones that mark change. Generally, this precision corresponds to the authors who later approach the phenomenon to study it. It is often even difficult to reach consensus around that detail. In Spain, for example, there are those who say that the transition began with the murder of Carrero Blanco; others, with the death of Franco, and some, with the Law of Political Reform. In Chile, the dissensions are greater. In my studies I locate the beginning of the transition in the promulgation of the 1980 Constitution, because that document –lacking in legitimacy– contains the mechanisms to which the Democrats turned to advance towards freedom. Nonetheless, some authors place it in the referendum of 1980. What I want to say with this is that we are still in the eye of the storm, and only once it has settled will we be able to establish milestones to describe what we experienced.

What we can see in the midst of the storm is the dimension of the damage left by the autocratic wake of the Chavista revolution. If in 2014 we began to talk about transition, in 2020 it is convenient to start reflecting in terms of transformation. The destruction of Chavismo is so profound that it requires broad levels of reconstruction. Does this demand of reality mean that liberation must be achieved through rupture? No. A transformation can be initiated by means of an agreed liberation

or by rupture. Let us remember Germany in two moments: 1945 and 1989. There is no relationship between transformation and the genre of political change. What can make a difference is the deliberate transformative disposition of those leading the process. That is what we encourage with the contributions offered by the development of this concept in Venezuela.