

# Democratization



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# Our language of suffering

Paola Bautista de Alemán

On September 15, the report of the United Nations' Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Venezuela was released. The instance examined more than 2,000 cases of serious human rights violations that occurred in the country, and the document accurately describes 48 of them. It offers names, exposes modes and reveals dynamics. Different considerations could be made on the subject, technical analyses, theoretical observations. This article, however, reflects upon the depths of the wounds suffered in recent years and their impact on the soul of our nation. It is an approximation to the more human face of the problem.

As a starting point, I will turn to the works of Svetlana Alexievich. In her writings she collects with special sensitivity the inner world of those who survived communist totalitarian systems. In *The End of "Homo sovieticus"*, she publishes interviews with men and women who lived in the Soviet Union and are now part of a post-totalitarian reality that alienates them. There is an anonymous testimony that refers to "the language of suffering". It states the following: "We never stop talking about suffering... it is our way of knowing. To us, westerners seem naive because they don't suffer like we do. They have medicines for all ills. We, instead, suffered the Gulag, we stuffed the fields with corpses during the war and we decontaminated the land of Chernobyl

with our bare hands... and here we are now sitting on the ruins of socialism. It looks like the scenery after a battle. We have leathery skin; we are so crushed... we speak our own language, the language of suffering”.

I go back to that paragraph every so often. Without wishing to equate tragedies, I wonder about the impact of this episode on our political culture, on our history, and on the soul of our nation. The report sets out harsh realities that we must not –and cannot– ignore. I will refer to three, although surely there are more. First, the perpetrators are Venezuelans. There is certainly outside tutoring, but we have to banish the false premise that offered consolation to our republican pride and established that torture was carried out by Cubans. Those who persecute, kidnap, torture and murder are children of this land. The degradation of hatred reached our veins. We live with the perpetrators. They could be our neighbors. We have probably come across them in the market. Perhaps they are parents of our children's classmates or we have met them in the elevator. Being Venezuelans, they have put our so-called *picardía criolla*, our native mischief, at the service of barbarism. It hurts when we notice traits of creativity in the way they name the parts that make up the structure of evil. Torture rooms and punishment cells have funny names: “*El cuarto de los locos*”, “*La casa de los sueños*”, “*El tigrito*”, or “*El bañito*”<sup>1</sup>. In them, our joyous sagacity gave itself over to wickedness.

Second, the military and their families bear the brunt. The report distinguishes between the serious human rights violations that occur in the SEBIN and the DGCIM. They are both wild. But especially vile patterns are observed in the DGCIM. This barbarism extends itself in a systematic and ruthless way to the

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1 In the same order: The crazy room, The house of dreams, Little tiger or Little bathtub.

military family. Point 323 establishes that the female relatives of the DGCIM political prisoners taken to clandestine houses were sexually assaulted and/or tortured with asphyxiation, beatings and electric shocks. And so, we also coexist with the victims. They can be the mothers of our children's schoolmates. They can be our neighbors. We have surely come across them in the market or we have seen their tired eyes in the elevator. After reading the report, I have special compassion for the military and their families. For them, everything is pain. The perpetrators do not realize that they are the first victims of this structure of evil and that sooner or later they will face justice. And those perpetrated suffer a double wake of pain: on the one hand, they face the cruelty of their brothers in arms and, on the other, they bear the suspicious gaze of a society that suffers from oppression.

Third, the most humble sectors suffer barbarism more intensely. In 2016, I went on a tour of the Libertador municipality in the state of Carabobo. There was a pool of blood at the entrance of a house. Inside, two women were crying. The night before there had been "an operation" and the officials executed the young man who lived in that home. The boy's mother was careful to affirm that her son was not a thug. The Mission's report accurately describes the *Operaciones de Liberación del Pueblo* and the *Operaciones de Liberación Humanista del Pueblo*. In these procedures, officials of the PNB, SEBIN, CICPC, DGCIM and the National Guard break into poor communities and destroy everything in their path. Bullets have no regard for anything. They go through walls and bodies. In the cases included, the arrests and executions are described. Anonymous and unburied corpses. People who have disappeared. What irony! The revolution and its contradictions! They always said they were the government of the people. Those who promised a better life impose on us a fatal overdose.

I reiterate my questions about the depth of the wounds and their impact on the soul of our nation. Dagoberto Valdés, Cuban thinker and social fighter, refers to the *anthropological damage* caused by authoritarian systems of the spirit of the Chavista revolution. He refers to the weakening, injury or breakdown of the essentials of the human person that subverts life in truth, undermines their freedom and violates the rights of people, which deeply hurts their intrinsic dignity and at the same time provokes citizens to passively adapt to the environment, and a persistent social anomie. In Venezuela, symptoms of the disease referred to by Valdés are observed. There are concrete signs. The United Nations Mission report confronts us with a reality that for many years some denied and others classified as exaggerated. In the future, we will not be able to say that we did not know. There are too many documented and undocumented cases. It is rampant perversity and rational systematization of evil. It is the first time that Venezuelans have faced such horrors. We are a country of victims and perpetrators who are torn between pain and shame. We will hardly ever be the same again. We face the challenge of managing this episode that has revealed to us the evil of which we are capable of and that we are called upon to repair.

To finish, I return to the words that Svetlana Alexievich collected and which I referred to at the beginning of this article. I wonder if Venezuelans will develop their own language of suffering. And if we develop it... how will it be? The horizon that awaits us is wide. We are compelled to fill it with the hope that justice and forgiveness offer. We must not forget that beneath this leathery skin that has undergone suffering, repression, torture, exile and death is our Creole nobility. The ideas of Roscio, the verses of Andrés Bello, the novels of Gallegos, the paintings of Reverón, the works of Cabrujas, the political expertise of the founders of democracy and the testimony of thousands of Venezuelans who

do not give up still remain. We are not orphans, and turning to the best of our republican heritage will help us win in magnanimity. Our language of suffering must accompany the horrors overcome and “the Venezuelan affirmative”. It must include our lights and our shadows. We will honor the victims and review the causes that enabled this devastation. Our language of suffering must be a path of healing that allows us to advance and achieve what Saint John Paul II called "the moral maturity" of the peoples that have survived communism.

# Conclusions

The purpose of this ninth edition is to provide the reader with tools to help them understand the political, electoral and Human Rights circumstances in Venezuela. Paola Bautista de Alemán, Juan Miguel Matheus and Ángel Medina Deivis offer three perspectives regarding the concepts of freedom of conscience, anthropological damage and suffrage in Venezuela.

As a conclusion, and as a way to entice political debate, we will highlight a single idea from each article:

1. Torture, kidnapping and murder are a clear demonstration of totalitarianism and have the intention of manipulating the conscience of the human being and degrading him until his soul is broken. The soul is the most important part of the being. They failed to break Fernando Albán and, in the process, ended his life. They ended his earthly life, but his soul was left intact. Fernando Albán held on to his freedom of conscience until the last minute. This makes him eternally and forever free.
2. The language of Venezuelan suffering: Paola Bautista de Alemán delves into this term found in a testimony of the post-totalitarian reality of the Soviet Union, and relates it to the report on Venezuela of the United Nations' Independent International Fact-finding Mission. The author, rather than theoretically explaining this term, refers to it in an elaboration of the consequences and damage that Venezuelan society is experiencing as a result of the actions of totalitarianism. Along these lines, the author also refers to three realities that worsen the consequences and

that could increase the damage: first, that the perpetrators of torture, forced disappearances and repression are themselves Venezuelans; secondly, that dissident military personnel and their families are the most affected by cruel treatment and violence by their peers; and thirdly, that the most humble sectors suffer this barbarism much more without being able to raise their voices. The article, rather than posing a theoretical dissertation, poses a question: What is the extent of the anthropological damage that Venezuelans are suffering? And with this, she recalls and debates the term developed by the Cuban author Dagoberto Valdés in order to be able to delve into how the dignity of Venezuelan society is, feels and acts.

3. Suffrage in Venezuela has lost value as a citizen's instrument to decide and provoke political change. Voting is an essential characteristic of democracy. However, this is not a *carte blanche* that means that every country where elections are held is democratic. On the contrary, for voting to really be a democratic tool, it must take place in a context of transparency, with impartial arbitrators and with clear rules respected by political actors. This is not the current case in the country. In Venezuela, conditions for a transparent electoral process must be demanded and built, where the results are truly respected and representative of the clamor of the citizens. Without these conditions, the electoral processes will simply be a tool for the totalitarian regime to establish itself and stay in power.

This edition concludes with these three ideas. We hope that these articles contribute to the political understanding of Venezuela and stimulate the debates of the current crossroad in the country.