

Democratization



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From authority inculturation to the rule of law

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This study is an effort to shed light upon a discussion that Venezuelans have had for many years about the possibility of building the country under a rule of law or if we are rather condemned to an authoritarian form of government for society to function under a certain order. Today, this conversation has focused on the permanence of the current regime and on whether it is possible to transition to a modern democracy, governed by a rule of law, that transparently manages public money.

A preliminary distinction is essential to understand the approach of this article: legal-political culture and tradition. Culture has many meanings, but the one that interests us in this case is offered by Almond & Verba¹ regarding political culture, which Friedman² later adopted and adapted to the legal system, coining the expression “legal culture”. In this study, these variants have been associated, asserting that legal-political culture refers to people’s attitudes, opinions, values and behaviors regarding institutions from both the political and the legal systems. The

1 Gabriel Almond y Sidney Verba, *The civic culture: political attitudes and democracy in 5 nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).

2 Lawrence Friedman, *The legal system. A social science perspective* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1975).

expression can have neutral value: there can be democratic, authoritarian, criminal cultures, or even a culture of illegality³. The expression “civic culture” is generally used to denote the variant that implies respect for the values of democracy and of the rule of law.

Tradition, also related to legal and political systems, denotes a part of culture that has remained in a society for a long time. It is the most rooted part of culture⁴. Cultures can change along with society, although they cannot be changed by decree. Traditions also change, but they do so more slowly.

This article is a social history essay whose purpose is to explain the terms of a long discussion that Venezuelans have had since the 19th century, but which has become a current and urgent matter today with the long-announced decline of Chavismo and the transition to democracy. One side of the argument holds, to put it simply, that the political transition is at hand and that the task is to design the appropriate institutional framework for the implantation of democracy, the rule of law, and civic culture in Venezuela. Perhaps the most indicative document of this position is the *Statute that governs the transition to democracy*, approved by the National Assembly on February 5th, 2019. The other position is more diffuse. Basically it implies that Chavismo is much more deeply rooted in the Venezuelan population as it comes from an authoritarian tradition, and that the change of regime can occur,

3 Carlos Nino, *Un país al margen de la ley. Estudio de la anomia como componente del subdesarrollo argentino* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1992).

Mauricio García Villegas, *Normas de papel: la cultura del incumplimiento de las reglas* (Bogotá: Centro de Estudios de Derecho, Justicia y Sociedad, 2009).

4 John Merryman y Rogelio Pérez-Perdomo, *The civil law tradition*. 4^a ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018).

but for another equally authoritarian. As Dante describes it in *Inferno* (IV, 33), without hope we are condemned to live only in desire. Of course, many intermediate positions are possible.

This essay does not offer a new proposal that could convince everyone, but it sheds light on the terms of the conversation, explores the assumptions of the different visions that thinkers of the past and present offer us, and identifies the public policies that could be designed based on the different theoretical premises.

This discussion in Venezuela is deeply rooted in universal thought, but we will keep the vast bibliographic references that could be cited to a minimum. Recognizing the limits of personal knowledge, the focus will be placed upon the Venezuelan bibliography, not only because it is a more comprehensive field but because it is the most relevant in this case.

The essay includes a historical section that establishes the terms of the conversation in the past and an approach regarding the conversation in the present, and some of the practical consequences that accepting some premises or others may lead to.

Civilization, barbarism and caesarism

The first idol that will be hereby tackled is Venezuelan essentialism: the nature of Venezuelans is to be attributed to the fact that Spanish conquerors had certain defects or that the indigenous people who were found in Venezuelan territory had others, and, on top of that, since conquerors also raped the natives, we were born under the sign of violence. I do not wish to enter into a discussion on genetics about which my knowledge is scarce, but I suspect that Venezuelans today have very mixed origins due to successive waves of immigration. If we have any

genetic characteristic, perhaps it is miscegenation and diversity. In addition, I have my reservations about the brocard “Venezuelans are not Swiss”. On the one hand, it is obvious, but this does not imply that we have a completely different mental structure and abilities than the Swiss, although we have a very different story. I am among those who take the universal declaration of rights seriously, but I do not deny that there is a cultural dimension and that there are traditions in the political sphere, all which we must analyze later.

Those who thought our political organization in 1811, 1821 or 1830 were on the side to which I subscribe. Laboriously, they produced constitutions establishing the fundamental rules of operation of the State, with separation and limitations in the branches of the public power, and declaring the rights of citizens. They surely sinned by addressing imaginary citizens, but we must admire their effort that went beyond writing constitutions: they established institutions and wrote important works. Beyond the debate on federalism and the place of God in the Republic⁵, they were “liberal” in political terms. Páez had clear leadership, but he was not an authoritarian ruler. Under his leadership, there was a serious effort to create institutions⁶. Perhaps the key work of the period is the *Political manual for Venezuelans*⁷, which is both the explanation of the constitutional government (which we now

5 Guillermo Avelledo Coll, *Pro religione et patria. República y religión en la crisis de la sociedad colonial venezolana (1810-1834)* (Caracas: Academia Nacional de la Historia y Universidad Metropolitana, 2011).

6 Elena Plaza, *El patriotismo ilustrado o la organización del estado en Venezuela 1830-1847*, (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 2007). Rogelio Pérez Perdomo, *Justicia e injusticias en Venezuela* (Caracas: Academia Nacional de la Historia y Universidad Metropolitana, 2011).

7 Francisco Javier Yanes, *Manual político del venezolano -1839- y Apuntamientos sobre la legislación de Colombia -1823* (Caracas: Academia Nacional de la Historia y Universidad Metropolitana, 2009).

call the rule of law) and an effort to transmit its values to the Venezuelan population. In other words, to build citizenship⁸.

Later on, under the leadership of Guzmán Blanco, but also during the presidency of Rojas Paul (1870-1890), there is a more conspicuous and less sincere organizational effort⁹. The desire for a society ordered by law is maintained adopting codes, reforming study programs and in works of political and legal thought such as those of Felipe Larrazábal, Luis Sanojo and Jesús Muñoz Tébar, as well as in political programs of the time.

Laureano Vallenilla Lanz was a shrewd critic of jurists who tried to build a rule of law at this early stage of the Republic. The violence of the independence war destroyed the Venezuelan elite and undisciplined the population. Very suggestively, the author compared Venezuela to Chile, where independence did not lead to these destructive consequences and where social stratification was maintained. Socially, Venezuela became more democratic, but in need of a Caesar to impose order, an idea which inspired the title of his book¹⁰.

8 This part of the study revisits “The misfortunes of the constitution”, which is part of *Suma del pensar venezolano* and which contains sections of some of the fundamental texts that are cited (Pérez Perdomo, 2015). In the case of Yanes, his criticism of the Cúcuta constitution that was included in the edition of the Metropolitan University and the National Academy of History (Yanes,) is also important. Although this document was known, it had never been published before.

9 Rogelio Pérez Perdomo, *Justicia e injusticias en Venezuela* (Caracas: Academia Nacional de la Historia y Universidad Metropolitana, 2011).

10 Laureano Vallenilla Lanz, *Cesarismo democrático* (Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1991).

According to Vallenilla, the jurists were the great culprits of trying to impose a government with strong constitutional limitations when what was required was someone to impose order.

Note that Vallenilla limits himself to the independence stage to explain the need for authoritarianism in Venezuelan society. His approach simplifies the rich history of the 19th century, the stage of many rebellions and civil wars, but which also encompassed efforts to establish institutions. Even the 1909 constitution, the first of Gomecismo, is politically liberal. It expresses the project of limiting political power and separating the branches of public power. Naturally, it can be argued that this was hypocritical of Gómez, who can be blamed for an authoritarian project from the beginning. However, accepting a liberal constitution indicates that Gómez and the supporters of authoritarianism recognized the strength of politically liberal ideas in order to not try to impose authoritarianism during times of political change. Vallenilla Lanz does not acknowledge this.

Historians with a more culturalist vision have emphasized the liberal features of Gomecismo¹¹. Even the penal legislation of the period is liberal¹². Nobody denies the authoritarian and repressive nature of the regime, but the ‘doctors’ or ‘lights of Gomecismo’¹³ surely saw Gomez as a peacemaker who could command a more legalistic regime. In fact, this was what happened, and what the periods of López Contreras and Medina meant, although it is a

11 Manuel Caballero, *Gómez, el tirano liberal* (Caracas: Monte Ávila Editores, 1993) y Yolanda Segnini, *Luces del gomecismo* (Caracas: Alfadil, 1987).

12 Rogelio Pérez Perdomo, *Justicia e injusticias en Venezuela* (Caracas: Academia Nacional de la Historia y Universidad Metropolitana, 2011).

13 Yolanda Segnini, *Luces del gomecismo* (Caracas: Alfadil, 1987).

sufficiently close stage and some still consider the period 1936-1945 to be a mere prolongation of Gomez authoritarianism.

This excursion in history is intended to draw attention to the fact that there has been a persistent aspiration to constitute a State governed by law and where political power is controlled. It has not been attained partly because the rule of law is itself a normative model and real legal systems can move closer to or further away from that model. The *Rule of Law Index* (www.wjp-rule-law-index) does exactly that: it ranks countries according to how close their legal systems are to the model. In Venezuela, even under a party system (1958-1998), the rule of law was weak: human rights were knowingly violated, torture was applied to force confessions, and the judicial system was penetrated by corruption networks called 'judicial tribes'¹⁴. The glass may look half full or half empty, but it is a mistake not only to see it completely empty, but to believe it is impossible to fill it, at least to an acceptable level.

Julio César Salas¹⁵ associated authoritarianism with barbarism, while civilization represented the rule of law. He did so under the regime of Gómez, which marginalized him as an intellectual¹⁶. The great Venezuelan novel, *Doña Bárbara*¹⁷, elaborates on this distinction: the law, embodied in the lawyer Santos Luzardo, makes Doña Bárbara go to more remote places. In reality, if we were to update the writings of Salas and Gallegos, it seems as if

14 Rogelio Pérez Perdomo, *Justicia e injusticias en Venezuela* (Caracas: Academia Nacional de la Historia y Universidad Metropolitana, 2011).

15 Julio César Salas, *Civilización y barbarie* (Caracas: Ediciones Centauro, 1977).

16 Rogelio Pérez Perdomo, "Los infortunios de la constitución en Venezuela", en *Suma del pensar venezolano*, ed. Asdrúbal Baptista, tomo II, libro 2 (2015).

17 Rómulo Gallegos, *Doña Bárbara* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1997).

he came to Caracas and is now still leading us. That is why it is important to analyze the current situation and future prospects.

From authoritarianism to the democratic state of law

The present is bleak. Analysts tell us that we live in a gangster State, that is, under a ruling group that has distorted state functions and that uses State agencies for the commission of crimes¹⁸. Others observe that it is a failed State¹⁹, that is, that it has ceased to fulfill its functions, in serious detriment of the Venezuelan society. The decline of Chavismo has long been perceived²⁰, and today the thunderous failure of its 'revolution' is undeniable. The dramatic hardships of the Venezuelan population and the massive emigration are indicators of failure. Its leaders feel the rejection of the population and cannot move freely across the world because they risk being apprehended as criminals. However, the Chavista revolution seems to be resilient because it remains in power despite little internal and external support²¹.

We will not elaborate on the resilience of the current government. There is no doubt that its criminal activities have provided it with unusual resources and that the abdication of the traditional functions of the State reduces its expenses. The unlimited use of repression obviously instills fear in the population. Those who saw an easy transition to democracy were obviously wrong. Twenty years of a political regime obviously

18 Paola Bautista de Alemán, "Bolivarian revolution and the development of the gangster state in Venezuela", *Democratization* 1, no. 1 (2019).

19 Moisés Naím y Francisco Toro, "Venezuela's suicide: lessons from a failed state", *Foreign Affairs* 6 (Nov-Dec, 2018).

20 Margarita López Maya, *El ocaso del chavismo: Venezuela 2005-2015* (Caracas: Alfa, 2016).

21 Juan Miguel Matheus, "La resiliencia de la revolución chavista", *Democratización* 1, no. 4 (2019).

have an effect on society. The interest of this essay is precisely the effect of the Chavista revolution on Venezuelan political culture: whether it has accentuated the authoritarianism as part of our political tradition and if, ultimately, the construction of a State closer to the normative model of the rule of law is possible.

Sociologists hold that Venezuelan society has become anomic. This term does not imply the absence of norms but rather confusion regarding them and even the weakening of their ability to shape behavior²². The excessive rates of violence and homicide²³ and the behavior of rulers, which have a modeling effect, are clear signs of anomie. The establishment of the FAES, a death squad, by the government, and the fact that it refuses to dissolve it despite an express condemnation by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, is an indicator that the Venezuelan population cannot understand the function of law or ethics by observing the conduct of the State. Venezuelans who are in their 20s or 30s today have known no other political regime and have no civic education either in their schools or in daily practice.

However, anomie itself is not a permanent state nor is it general throughout society. Within a society, there are subcultures, that is, groups that share a certain culture. It is well known, for example, that certain groups have criminal cultures, which perceive committing certain crimes as an appropriate form of conduct. But the opposite can also happen: certain groups can maintain or develop different values and cultures from criminal

22 Nikos Passas, "Theorising in the anomie tradition: Durkheim, Merton and beyond", en *Anomia: normas, expectativas y legitimación social*, ed. Tosca Hernández (Oñati: International Institute for the Sociology of Law, 1993).

23 Roberto Briceño-León y Alberto Camardiel, *Delito organizado, mercados ilegales y democracia en Venezuela* (Caracas: Alfa, 2015).

groups. Certain circumstances can lead to anomic situations that are then overcome.

Another study has argued that Venezuelan society as a whole is not anomic²⁴, although there may be groups that appreciate disturbances such as the use of violence. The effect of the Chavista revolution on the configuration of the mentality of Venezuelans seems reduced to a not-too-large group of the Venezuelan population, not necessarily greater than the 15% of the population that generally declares their support for the regime.

On the other hand, there have been situations of quite general anomie that were soon overcome at different moments of transition. This reminds us of Dahrendorf's²⁵ description of the situation in Germany immediately after the defeat of the Nazi regime in 1945. It is likely that the proportion of the German population that supported the Nazis between 1933 and 1945, and perhaps after 1945, was very significant. On the other hand, the authoritarian tradition of Germany at that time was much longer and more solid than that of Venezuela. How was it possible that they built a rule of law and a democracy in the following decades? Germany is not the only example; the Czech Republic is a more recent example.

Chavistas have wanted to give a historical foundation to their revolution and present themselves in the vein of a Venezuelan and nationalist tradition. For this, they have considerably distorted the history of Venezuela. They have taken Bolívar as their father to the point that they originally called their revolution Bolivarian. To do this, they have distorted Bolívar's complex thoughts, as well

24 Rogelio Pérez Perdomo, "Los infortunios de la constitución en Venezuela", en *Suma del pensar venezolano*, ed. Asdrúbal Baptista, tomo II, libro 2 (2015).

25 Ralf Dahrendorf, *Law and order* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1985).

as distorted his image to make him similar to Chávez. They have rewritten history, giving prominence to secondary characters and demonizing or trying to overshadow Páez. It is true that there were civil wars in Venezuela, but the history of Venezuela is not only a war nor only military history. There have been efforts to establish institutions and periods in which important achievements were made in such substantial areas such as health and education, in addition to economic growth and modernization. However, traditional historians have given priority to military figures and war events in the history of Venezuela.

This perspective of the history of the country, that is, of our tradition and of ourselves, is again at stake now that the decline of Chavismo, or rather its thunderous failure, allows us to envision a transition. Those who still think Venezuelan society is irremediably violent and undisciplined, and that this has been aggravated by the Chavista revolution, undoubtedly contemplate a new Caesar, a liberal tyrant who imposes discipline, using the language of Caballero²⁶. Those who contemplate the persistence of the effort to build a republic in its own sense, that is, a limited government that respects the citizens, will envision –not only as a form of desire, but as a possibility– the creation of a modern democracy, a polyarchy in the Dahlian sense²⁷, a rule of law.

Democracy and the rule of law cannot be decreed. It is not enough to modify the constitution and a number of State organization laws. It is mainly a cultural project. The founders of modern democracy in Venezuela reached a political agreement that avoided violence in the political conflict and legitimized the opposition. It was an important achievement, and the period of

26 Manuel Caballero, *El tirano liberal* (Caracas: Monte Ávila Editores, 1993).

27 Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy: participation and opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971).

1958-1998 can be called republican and considerably successful in economics and politics, but it failed to address the civic education of citizens and to train the professional and political elite in the values of the rule of law and democracy. Surely that was one of the roots of its decline. Those tasks are still pending.

In the cultural-institutional vision, many aspects require attention. The short list hereby offered is surely also influenced by my own professional training in law.

One issue that has already occupied many is transitional justice, that is, how to deal with the massive violation of human rights and the serious crimes that have been committed during the period. Any judicial system that can be imagined will have limited capacity to solve cases, and the decision of which cases to prosecute and which to dismiss is enormously complicated. Fortunately, some experiences from various countries that have transitioned towards democracy can be helpful to learn from other experiences.

A topic closely related to the latter is that of the justice system. The regime has made successive purges and enormous efforts to indoctrinate its members. A number of judges and officials have been instrumental in the worst human rights abuses. Furthermore, the proper functioning of the rule of law requires judges, prosecutors and other officials of the system to act independently and impartially, respecting the constitution and the laws. Assessing their performance and helping those who remain to embrace the values of the rule of law is a daunting task.

Higher education, and especially that of State officials and the political-administrative elite, has been neglected and requires very serious attention. In the particular case of law, approximately a

third of the country's graduates in the last ten years have basically been politically indoctrinated and have studied very little law. In traditional education, law is transmitted as mere technology, without paying attention to the fact that it is the guarantee of people's freedom and the limitation of State power.

In formal education, civic education was suppressed many years ago, before Chavismo, and replaced by pre-military and military education. In the way politics has been conducted in the last twenty years, the basic rules of institutional behavior have been ignored. The effort to be made in both formal and informal education is very important.

The Chavista regime has made an important effort to distort the history of Venezuela²⁸. Education in history is important for the way we envision the country, that is why it is important to address this issue. A more institutional vision of the country's history in the context of a Latin American and world history would be of enormous interest for the formation of citizens.

Building a democratic culture under the rule of law is thus a complex and lengthy task, which we hope to start soon.

28 Inés Quintero, "Enseñar historia en Venezuela: carencias, tensiones y conflictos", *Caravelle* 104 (2015).

The post-totalitarian reconstruction

Francisco Plaza Vegas

An essential characteristic of the Bolivarian Revolution is its dynamic as a continuous and deliberate process of destruction. Venezuela has already suffered more than twenty years from a political regime that has tirelessly and systematically demolished all aspects of national life. If we also consider the regime's ability to shroud its evil actions in the dark, shamelessly hiding and manipulating the information, or simply lying about the reality of the country with absolute cynicism, it is only possible to imagine that the already undeniable misery within the country is still many times more severe. Venezuelans have confirmed that it is always possible to be worse off than before, and that there isn't really such thing as "rock bottom". Destruction will continue its unstoppable and devastating path as long as the regime remains in power.

When facing this bleak scenario, it seems naive, and perhaps even foolish, to think about reconstruction. The only realistic task would be to focus all efforts on removing this destructive regime as soon as possible, and other actions would not only be useless distractions but even counterproductive, because it could undermine the determination necessary to achieve this essential objective. Only when Venezuela is freed from the occupation of this invading force –a description that applies not only in a

metaphorical sense–, will the people undertake the long task of building the country again.

Nonetheless, this essay proposes some considerations to rebuild the nation: reconstruction is not a consequence of, but rather a condition for the regime's demise. As indicated in the title, it is to be a *post-totalitarian* reconstruction. The usage of this adjective denotes the challenge to rebuild upon the destruction that even exceeds the material and institutional devastation of the country. Its real core lies in the spirit, because what totalitarianism ultimately corrodes is a shared vision of what is good and just that constitutes our nation. Only a nation united in goodness and justice can overcome the evil that a totalitarian regime sows. The material reconstruction of the country, therefore, will be impossible without first reconstituting the spirit of the nation. The task of recovering its *ethos* is thus even more urgent, and perhaps even more arduous, than the immense labor of reconstructing material goods.

A revolution of nihilism

Perhaps one of the greatest difficulties of confronting the horror of the Bolivarian Revolution has been the reluctance to fully acknowledge the evil it embodies. Euphemisms used early on such as “competitive autocracy”, “authoritarian populism”, “regime with a democratic deficit” or “semi-democracy”, which diminished and allowed to ignored the signs of the regime's totalitarian vocation, are mostly –and it is incredible that not yet totally– a thing of the past. The great oil boom experienced during its first years allowed the regime to finance its lies in order to maintain popular support, and thus certainly made it difficult for the people to recognize that, from its very inception –as soon

as Chávez swore on a “moribund constitution”–, the seed of totalitarianism was sown. In accordance with the dynamics of the totalitarian virus, however, it was only a matter of time before the revolution displayed the most terrible signs of its perverse identity with all its fury. Hannah Arendt¹ stated that the road towards totalitarian domination goes through many intermediate stages, and all its cruelty is unfolded only when it has nothing to fear. It is therefore not a matter of whether the course of the Bolivarian Revolution has been distorted or deviated by the successor of the late messianic leader. On the contrary, the Revolution has followed its natural trajectory –the “process”, as they call it– by virtue of its essence as a project of total domination. In simpler words, the Bolivarian Revolution is today what it always was, only at a later stage of its development.

Among the current devastation and the undeniable cruelty with which the regime violates the most essential rights of Venezuelans, those euphemisms –which I insist have not completely disappeared– have given way to characterizations that, even though are more severe, do not yet fully reflect Venezuela’s decay in all its complexity. It is true that the regime is a “failed State” because it lacks legitimacy and the control of the entire national territory, it shares a monopoly on the use of violence with irregular groups (*colectivos*), and it does not guarantee the most basic material necessities of the population. It is also true that it is a “criminal or gangster” regime, since it uses the structures and mechanisms of State powers to organize crime. This label suggests that the problem is different from that of corrupt governments. The activity of a “criminal State” focuses precisely on using its structures and powers to organize and

1 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken, 2004), 567.

decide on the most effective ways to achieve its criminal purposes, up to the point where the only truly profitable activities are illicit ones. Characterizing it as a “narco-State” evidences that the regime’s favored criminal activities are related to drug trafficking and commercialization, and money laundering. Another common classification is “terrorist State”, which refers to two realities: one stresses the fact that the regime provides financial and logistical support to international terrorist organizations; the other, the fact that the regime uses fear and intimidation –terror itself– as an instrument to control citizens and intermediate groups in society.

All these terms uncover one or another aspect of the regime, but none, even if referenced together, is able to fully convey the nature of the characteristic destruction of a totalitarian regime. It is a serious mistake to attribute the demolition of Venezuela to the irresponsibility, ignorance or improvisation of those in charge of the government apparatus. It is beyond doubt that these defects abound in the official nomenclature. However, the problem is still much more acute since the destruction is continuous and deliberate. The nature of this destruction cannot be contained by the terms “failed”, “gangster”, “narco-criminal”, or “terrorist”.

When the term “totalitarianism” was introduced and developed by political philosophy in the 20th century, it sought to describe the nature of a new autocratic form of government that could not be explained with the traditional concepts of tyranny and dictatorship and, especially, which could arise in any country for being specifically linked to the spiritual crisis of modernity. The theory of totalitarianism explores the phenomenon of radical rebellion against the traditional understanding of the relationship between man and politics in Western civilization. One of its fundamental postulates is that politics, in regard to its ends, is

always limited by the fact that it can never cover all that humans need to reach fulfillment. It is not the duty of politics to make people happy because its field of action is delimited by human nature itself.

In its most primitive sense, totalitarian rebellion consists in demanding totality for politics, rejecting anything that implies any limit. The concrete ways of applying this unlimited way of understanding politics vary according to historical and cultural circumstances, but ultimately the various manifestations of totality come together in this excessive aspiration to redeem man through politics. The totalitarian reality comprises a set of closely intertwined characteristics, so any of them allow to understand the phenomenon as a whole. Hence, philosophers of politics have described the totalitarian phenomenon using some of its essential elements to reveal how all the symptoms of this “virus” come together as a kind of “syndrome”, originating and reinforcing each other. For instance, Eric Voegelin² analyzes totalitarianism from gnosticism; Hannah Arendt³, from the essence of totalitarian terror; Manuel García Pelayo⁴, as a form of eschatological myth; Karl Jaspers⁵, from the ability of totalitarian regimes to transmute lies into truth; and Albert Camus⁶, as an existential rebellion against the order of creation.

2 Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 108-89. See also, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1968), 13-49.

3 Aside from her famous *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, see also “Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government”, in *The Review of Politics* 15, n° 3 (July, 1953): 303-27.

4 Manuel García Pelayo. “El reino feliz de los tiempos finales”, *Revista de Ciencias Sociales* 2 (1958): 157-87.

5 Karl Jaspers, “The Fight against Totalitarianism”, in *Philosophy and the World – Selected Essays* (Washington D.C.: Gateway Editions, 1963), 68-87.

6 Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (Nueva York: Vintage Books, 1991).

In *The revolution of nihilism*⁷, the German politician Hermann Rauschning provides a particularly valuable analysis for the subject at hand, as the author helps to understand why continuous and deliberate destruction is also an essential axis of the totalitarian phenomenon. The totalitarian message, Rauschning explains, is always presented as an ideology of hope for the construction of a new order, when in reality it is nothing other than a movement towards nihilistic destruction. The true essence of totalitarianism is not in its philosophy or doctrine, but in its dynamics as a “process” of destruction. There is no clear ideology but only a firm determination to destroy any pre-existing order. The vigor of the totalitarian ideal is maintained, despite lacking concrete content, since the process of destruction is maintained at all costs: “We may not yet have reached goodness, but the process is moving forward as we are destroying evil”. Totalitarian regimes always need some conflict, some threat that must be destroyed to maintain the dynamic of the process: this is what really gives “life” to the revolutionary process. Totalitarian leaders, therefore, know that they must keep enthusiastic, delivering incendiary phrases, and that they can never stop warning against the serious threats to the process, the storms that are coming, assassination conspiracies, the enemies that regroup, and reviving the fighting spirit so as to never give advantage to the adversaries. The more inconsistent and irrational the message, the better, because the object of the speech is to maintain the combative instinct of the masses in order to justify a new phase of destruction. Therefore, it is totally useless to participate in discussions about the concrete content of a totalitarian doctrine. The hope that this process will ever end is also an illusion. As a permanent revolution, it is a “pure and simple action, a dynamic in the emptiness, a

7 Hermann Rauschning, *The Revolution of Nihilism* (Nueva York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1939).

revolution in variable time". Its 'philosophy' is to seize any opportunity to increase the movement's own power, in order to have more elements under its control⁸. Totalitarian processes, then, are movements that maintain their vitality as long as they are capable of generating enthusiasm for destruction. They are the negation and the absence of any positive affirmation, which means it has a continuous will to undo, which determines the nihilistic dimension of the totalitarian spirit. And, paradoxically, this lack of principle is one of the main secrets of its effectiveness: a permanent revolution, impossible to bring to an end⁹.

Rauschnig warns that the destructive vocation of a totalitarian regime does not end in the material demolition of a country. Not only hospital and educational centers, infrastructure, companies of all sizes, the countryside and agricultural production, electrical and telecommunications systems, transport networks, dams and aqueducts are being completely devastated, but institutions as well: courts of justice, the electoral system, the armed forces, the police, the media, universities and cultural centers are gradually distorted and corrupted. In short, everything that is indispensable for the normal development of a society. However, Rauschnig explains that the destruction is still much more severe. As devastating as all the destruction of a country's material and institutional order is, it is still inferior to the immense spiritual

8 Rauschnig, 23.

9 *Ibid.*, 51. As explained by Juan Carlos Rey: For Chávez, his revolution, unlike other classic revolutions in Latin America, is a continuous and progressive process that unfolds indefinitely over time. Using Trotsky's expression, Chavez has said that it is a "permanent Revolution", in which the original constituent power (i.e., the revolutionary power) is permanently active. "Mito y Política: el caso de Chávez en Venezuela", in J. C. Rey & G. T. Avelledo, *Actualidad de las formas irracionales de integración política*, Cuadernos del Centenario 3 (Caracas: Fundación Manuel García Pelayo, 2009), 19.

damage that a totalitarian regime is capable of inflicting on a nation's spirit. Even when it is not noticeable to the eye, like material devastation and institutional degradation are, it is illusory to suppose that the regime is less effective in its ability to demolish the vision of goodness and justice shared by the people: ultimately, what is to be destroyed is freedom, the most formidable obstacle to achieving total dominance, understood as people's ability to decide their own actions under the light of their conscience or, in other words, to be able to choose moral good according to right reason. There are various tactics that totalitarian regimes use to achieve this perverse goal. On the one hand, they extend their dominance over society in such a way that they practically force people to bow down as they need to survive or to continue their lives "normally". Food subsidies or the obligation to obtain a partisan identification document to be entitled to receive essential public services are examples of domination that are undermining the ability of people to act on conscience. Ultimately, these "subsidies" seek to break the will of the people, so that they yield, accept and adapt to what the regime requires, especially –and this is the critical point– if it involves acting against their own awareness. The regime destroys freedom in order to create a kind of blind automatism, since totalitarian rule requires conformity, rigidity and discipline¹⁰.

A second way to destroy freedom is even more terrible, with far more dire effects. Totalitarian regimes not only destroy freedom by bending people to their will, enticing them to act against their conscience. Its most perverse destructive task is that of the annihilation of morality itself, which is an essential aspect of freedom. The regime seeks to dull and cloud any

10 See Václav Havel, "The Power of the Powerless", in *Open Letters*, ed. Paul Wilson (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 134-35.

moral sense in the conscience of people in order to remove all potential obstacles to its project of total domination. At its finest, terror in the totalitarian experience does not primarily target the heinous acts these movements use to maintain and expand their domination, but their iron determination to use political power to transfigure human consciousness and thus spiritually degrade a society. This is why totalitarian regimes operate according to a value system radically different from the common categories that allow to distinguish between moral and immoral acts¹¹. For a totalitarian regime, there is no immoral or evil action in itself, however inhumane, as long as it serves the purpose of preserving power. In other words, human acts are valued according to whether or not they contribute to the continuity of the revolutionary process¹². This is the root of the cynical attitude that accompanies totalitarian leaders when they catalogue certain acts as virtuous despite they are clearly the opposite. They then exalt the lowest human passions to exploit rancor, resentment, envy, division and hatred among the people, because they consider that this contributes to maintaining and consolidating their power. They manage to mistake the good and the bad for each other in such a way that they celebrate the vilest acts as examples of virtue. Progressively, a general climate of apathy is created, in which the most grotesque actions of injustice and arbitrariness only provoke a very lukewarm reaction. Gradually, the nation

11 Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 303.

12 Graciela Soriano de García-Pelayo explains that the shameless irruption and installation in Venezuela of a perfectly “rational” revolutionary logic has been strange and different from the Christian and liberal vision of life held by hispanic societies (except for Cuba since the mid-20th century) so far. It is a means-to-ends logic that only conforms to the success of the revolution outside of any other “non-revolutionary” ethical or moral consideration. “La responsabilidad irresponsable”, *Claves de Razón Práctica* 196 (Madrid, October 2009), 5.

gets used to perceiving the common affairs of society based on the regime's amoral perspective: words become violent and hostile, mutual distrust grows, people degrade one another and express their rancor and hatred, obscenity prevails, the truth is manipulated, the humanity of others is denied, while everything that encourages valuing serene discussion, understanding, willingness to listen, the importance of the word, the testimony of life and peace is belittled. Reflecting on the situation of Eastern European countries after the collapse of Marxist systems, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI¹³ warned: The clearest and most awakened spirits of the liberated peoples speak of an immense moral abandonment, produced [by communism] after many years of spiritual degradation, and a dulling of the moral sense, whose loss and the dangers entails a damage that outweighs even economic consequences. The Patriarch of Moscow¹⁴ described the spiritual situation of the liberated countries after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall in similar terms, stating that the perceptive powers of men living under a system of deception are inevitably clouded; thus, it is necessary to lead humanity back to eternal moral values, and to recover the –almost extinct– ability to listen to God's counsel.

Having fully understood the extent of totalitarian destruction, it is necessary to consider why the regime must come to its demise before undertaking reconstruction efforts. The germs of totalitarian passion can only be erased in the souls of individuals who regain the sense of true good in their own existence. Therefore, the totalitarian regime can only collapse when people recognize that they cannot lead their existence according to the distorted definition of good and evil proposed by the amoral code of the

13 Joseph Ratzinger, *Verdad, valores, poder* (Madrid: Rialp, 1998), 54.

14 Ibid., 54-55.

revolution, and that they are responsible for their own lives in accordance with their conscientious truth. This means that, even if the regime were to end, the totalitarian spirit would remain among us if we fail to recover the meaning and value of goodness and justice, essential for the true exercise of human freedom. Any effort for material and institutional reconstruction could not last or be effective in a nation that does not agree on common moral convictions.

Konrad Adenauer's testimony

History offers precedents. At the end of the Second World War, Germany was totally devastated. The collapse was as total as the war: almost ten million Germans had died and the number of those who had to flee from the East was even larger, as were the wounded, widows and orphans; millions of men were prisoners of war; industrial production only reached a third of 1938's; the food ration was 1,000 calories a day; half of schoolchildren suffered from tuberculosis; unemployment, black market and demoralization were common¹⁵. The work necessary to rebuild such a country was immense. Where to start? Where to focus the very limited economic resources when everything was urgent, when everything was misery and desolation? How to find the necessary unity to undertake this or that path in the material reconstruction of the country without unleashing all kinds of disagreements, pressures, claims, confrontations, conflict and, eventually, violence? Whatever path was taken involved defining priorities and accepting sacrifices. The response of Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, the architect of the German reconstruction,

15 Horst Osterheld, "El político: documentación de una vida", in Terence Prittie, Horst Osterheld & François Seydoux, *Konrad Adenauer*. (Stuttgart: Bonn&Aktuell, 1983), 86.

was to convince the country that the first step was of a spiritual nature, and that the nation would be able to achieve nothing until a conscious answer to the following questions could be reached: How has the fall of the German people into the abyss been possible? What are the deepest reasons why we have fallen off such a precipice?¹⁶ According to Adenauer, the German people could only find the path towards a better future if they recognized the reasons why they had reached this fatal period in their history, so it was necessary to examine their conscience:

National socialism would not have reached power if it had not found in broad layers of the population the fertile ground to plant its poisoned seeds. I insist: broad layers of the population. It is incorrect to say that *caciques*, top military officials and big businessmen are the only culprits. It is quite possible that they are largely guilty, and their personal debt to the German people, who had to bring it before a court to be judged, will be as great as their power and influence once were. But that large part of the population that I have mentioned until now, the middle class, the peasants, the workers or the intellectuals, did not have the correct mindset, otherwise the victory of Nazism in 1933 and following years would not have been possible. The German nation is suffering from a mistaken conception of the State, of power and of the individual's own position. The State has been idolized and presented in an altar. The individual, their dignity and their worth have been sacrificed to this idol. National socialism is only a consequence, carried to the extreme of criminal-

16 Konrad Adenauer, *Memoirs 1945-53* (Chicago, Henry Regnery Company, 1966), 38-39.

ity, of the adoration of that materialistic vision of power and of the contempt of the value of the person¹⁷ (own translation).

According to Adenauer, the German people could not undertake the reconstruction without first acknowledging their deviation from the values of Christianity, having devoted themselves fully to the purely earthly, material things and to the deification of State power. It was there that they had to start in order to heal from within. The real challenge was to replace the materialistic with the Christian conception of life, for man had to be at the center and not the State. Under this Christian conception of life, individuals are not tools despised in the hands of officials, because as a work of God and responsible before God, they have a value that the group must respect¹⁸. During Germany's reconstruction, Adenauer concluded, the great task was to awaken the democratic forces of the nation so that democracy was much more than a parliamentary form of government but an ideology rooted in the recognition of dignity, the value, and the inalienable rights of every individual¹⁹.

Anamnesis

Recognizing the scope and effects of the nihilistic destruction of the spirit of Venezuelans at the hands of the Bolivarian Revolution is the true first step in reconstruction. It is a post-totalitarian reconstruction, as indicated in the title, not because it has to be undertaken after the fall of the regime, but because the reconstruction can only begin when there is a purpose to banish the totalitarian seed that the regime has planted in the soul of the

17 Konrad Adenauer, *El fin del nacionalismo* (Madrid: Encuentro, 2014), 29.

18 Osterheld, 87.

19 Adenauer, *Memoirs 1945-53*, 41.

nation. The true reconstruction, therefore, is not a consequence but a condition to bring this terrible chapter in our national history to an end. Adenauer wanted people to remember goodness and truth in order to regain that inner sense which allows to recognize the echo of truth in their conscience. Plato called *anamnesis* the process of searching from within, in the depth of consciousness, the meaning of our own existence in light of *logos*. For when facing injustice, it is not enough to denounce the evil which makes an individual a victim. The evil condemned must serve to illuminate the goodness lost. Fighting against the horrors of segregation and racial discrimination, Martin Luther King²⁰ warned that protesting could not be limited to describing injustices suffered. The worst aspect about discrimination is that it nurtures feelings of rancor in victims' hearts, making it harder for them to love, which we all yearn for. Therefore, what was decisive in Luther King's fight against racism was to recover what was lost: the vocation to love inscribed in the heart of every human being. In our case, it is not enough for the entire nation to identify and denounce all the appalling evil that the regime has caused. This is not enough, since reconstruction will only begin when the nation comes together in order to recover what was lost.

Venezuelan common speech demonstrates how people intuit that this call to *anamnesis* is, as a matter of fact, the way forward. Each generation finds the words to express the sense of its historical responsibility. Following the death of General Gómez, the challenge for that generation of Venezuelans was to initiate a new stage in the country's history, as is reflected in the words they used to describe this purpose: "found", "build", "raise", "sow",

20 This is a recurring matter in Martin Luther King's political discourse. See, e.g., "Letter from Birmingham Jail" in Martin Luther King, *Autobiography* (New York: Warner Books, 1998), 187-204.

etc. In our days, the words we hear are different. Venezuelans do not talk about building, but rather about rebuilding; not about finding themselves, but about re-finding ourselves; not about starting, but about renewing. In other words, we use words that evoke the need to remember a lost good. In some way, these words indicate that the challenge of this generation is not to start over but to resume a course based on foundations that remain to be rediscovered.

As a result of the false and perverse propaganda of the Bolivarian Revolution against the so-called '*puntofijismo*', many Venezuelans reject, almost *a priori* –and some even with vehemence–, any reference to the Venezuelan democratic experience that lasted for four decades until 1999. Is it not time to look forward towards new horizons for a country already so different from that of 1958? This is a much more recurrent question among young people, who have been told that what has been (mis)called the 'Fourth Republic' was a period of failure, characterized by corruption, elitist rule, support for economic oligarchies to the detriment of popular classes, and the repression of the dissident. Is it not necessary then to begin a new chapter in the history of Venezuela that not only leaves the Bolivarian Revolution behind but also that republican period that would have been the direct cause of the former's existence? What can that republican experience contribute to current day Venezuela and, especially, to its future? The words of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI come to mind, when he warned that turning away from the great moral forces of history is the suicide of a nation²¹.

It is evident that today's country is very different from the Venezuela of 1958, the year which inaugurated the civil republic

21 Ratzinger, 39.

after dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez was overthrown. It is also true that the experience of the country since 1999, the first year of the Bolivarian Revolution, has been in many ways unprecedented in its history. Despite its long militaristic and dictatorial past, Venezuela had never suffered the rigors of an autocracy of a totalitarian nature, inspired to such a high degree in the contempt for the freedom and dignity of humans: a revolution based on hatred, instrumentalized in violence and oriented towards the subordination of people to a dictatorship. There is also no precedent in our history for a dictatorial government that emerges, grows and strengthens itself using precisely the mechanisms of democracy that it destroys. A unique feature of the Bolivarian Revolution has undoubtedly been its particular ability to hide its project of total domination behind a facade of democratic institutions and procedures. The necessary reflection on the specific circumstances that Venezuela lives today and, particularly, on the essence of the Bolivarian Revolution as a project of totalitarian domination should not make us lose sight of the importance of analyzing current reality from a historical perspective. In doing so, we attest that the basic features of the Bolivarian Revolution are deeply rooted in Venezuela's historical development.

The Bolivarian Revolution disregards individual liberties, systematically violates fundamental human rights, exercises power arbitrarily and concentrates it autocratically at the expense of any institutional balance, relies on the Armed Forces as an organ of repression, validates its desecration in the courts of the law, and excessively squanders the country's resources without control and for its own benefit. It is not necessary to exhaust such a list to recognize the same arbitrary practices that characterized so many tyrannies of our past in the regime that has governed the

country since 1999. What distinguishes the Bolivarian Revolution as an unprecedented political phenomenon should not prevent us from verifying that, ultimately, it is one more dictatorship in the history of a country that has experienced tyranny after tyranny.

The voracious effort of the Bolivarian Revolution to destroy everything has also been a substantial part of Venezuela's experience with dictators. Rafael Caldera, founder of the civil republic together with Rómulo Betancourt, whose thoughts we must consider since a substantial axis of his political message was precisely *anamnesis*, used the myth of Sisypheus as a warning:

Many Venezuelan thinkers have pointed out that the Venezuelan drama could often be compared to the myth of Sisypheus, determined to ascend and lift a burden, but condemned to start again and again, after each new alternative, the same path of ascent. That transient interpretation of grief and national shame that great writers have identified when analyzing our history should remain present in the conscience of all of us, and I believe it is our duty to remind it to those who are governed and those who govern, to leaders and followers, to all the national community. The country must progress, and each stage of government would find no justification if it did not surpassed the previous one. The drama lies in the effort to destroy what has been achieved, to deny what has been obtained, to ignore the result of the efforts of previous stages (own translation) ²².

Similarly, Caldera recalled the words of Cecilio Acosta regarding this long history of "revolutions" that have done

22 "El Drama de Venezuela y el Mito de Sísifo", Folleto (Caracas: Fracción Parlamentaria de COPEI, 1984), 15.

nothing but destroy all previous achievements: they have made sacrifices, but no improvements; tears, but not yields; they have always been a deviation which has only led to the same point, with one more disillusion, with one less treasure²³.

The historical experience in Venezuela adds a critical element to this destructive nature, in order to recognize one of the most devastating aspects of the Bolivarian Revolution. As we have described, a fundamental component in the political message of this regime has been to arouse hostile, vengeful and spiteful emotions among the people. Through violent language that degrades the human condition with vile qualifications, the Bolivarian Revolution calls on the people to despise anyone who does not coincide with the revolutionary political project. Unfortunately, this sowing of hatred and rancor is not new in the history of Venezuela, either. On the contrary, it is perhaps the deepest root of the failures in the country's struggle for freedom. Regarding hatred as a decisive factor in our history, Caldera recurred to the testimony of Cecilio Acosta:

Political hatred, unleashing passions above all barriers and ignoring one another deviated us from the struggle within civilized institutions and led us to settle differences in cruel and destructive contests, ones that should have been overcome and resolved through the creative effort of our people, who on more than one occasion have testified to their immense capacity to assimilate and promote everything that serves to exalt the human spirit (own translation)²⁴.

23 *De Carabobo a Puntofijo* (Caracas: Libros Marcados, 2008), 158.

24 "El prestigio del Parlamento", President Rafael Caldera discourse on the installation of the 106th meeting of the Caracas Council, April 14, 1971, in Rafael Caldera, *Parlamento Mundial - Una voz latinoamericana* (Caracas: Ediciones del Congreso de la República, 1984), 24-25.

But autocratic arbitrariness, destruction and political hatred are not the only constants in our history. There have also been two traditions is constant struggle. Besides the *caudillista* tradition, there has also been a civil tradition that has always been reborn in the fight against tyrannies, a civil tradition that has recorded the longings for the dignified and legitimate organization of the Venezuelan people²⁵. Caldera responded to those who have argued that the people of Venezuela can only be governed by the tyrant's dominant whip stating that, deep within the national will, denatured by the abuses and outrages of the 'necessary gendarmes', beats a yearning for freedom, for human dignity, ready to sprout every time a faint crack was opened in the darkness of oppression²⁶. In the face of tyrannies, Venezuela has always had a civil tradition committed to sowing a fundamental sentiment to conquer the future in the collective spirit: the denial of hatred, the purpose of understanding, the essential conciliation to build the foundations of a better Venezuela²⁷. The country's historical experience, Caldera explained, shines a light of hope by teaching us that dictatorships have never been able to sustain themselves peacefully, achieving the adherence of the peoples; and that even those that have had peoples in permanent tension through constant stimuli and through the use of all tricks imagined by propaganda have not been able to achieve firm majority adherence, much less have they managed to maintain hold of power without the

25 Rafael Caldera's intervention in the first discussion of the draft of the National Constitution, in the session of the Constituent Assembly on February 11, 1947 in *Gobierno y época de la Junta Revolucionaria*, Colección Pensamiento Político Venezolano del Siglo XX, 54 (Caracas: Congreso de la República, 1989), 177-78.

26 Caldera, *De Carabobo a Puntofijo*, 113

27 Idem.

support of an expensive and radicalized military organization²⁸. Caldera insisted that however long dictatorships may have been, however absolute and strong in their exercise of command, when the will of the people is consulted, it is clearly inclined in favor of freedom and democracy²⁹. Acknowledging this lesson of hope, also present in our history, is as essential as noting the enormous obstacles on Venezuela's path to freedom.

This historical perspective should help us to better understand current reality. First, we recognize that arbitrariness, the desire for destruction and the use of hatred to divide the country, basic features of the regime, are embedded in a long tradition of dictatorships and autocratic governments. It is painful but necessary to accept that the Bolivarian Revolution is not an accident in the country's history, but a process with deep roots in our history of becoming a nation. This same historical perspective must also help acknowledge that what is truly unique from it is the democratic experience that began in Venezuela in 1958 and that lasted four decades. Political freedom, which for more than a century and a half after our independence was only a hope, never capable of prevailing in the face of dictatorships, finally managed to establish and consolidate itself for a considerable period of time. After achieving our independence as a sovereign nation, the civil republic was the first victory of freedom in our history. For the first time, freedom went from being a desire in the hearts of the people to becoming a real experience. In Caldera's words, after a century and a half lost in marches and countermarches, playing with violence to settle differences, and in the personal

28 "La libertad política, condición esencial del desarrollo", in *Ideario-La democracia cristiana en América Latina* (Barcelona: Ediciones Ariel, 1970), 119-20.

29 "Perspectivas de la democracia en América Latina" en *Parlamento Mundial - Una voz latinoamericana*, 104

and despotic ambition of the most daring in order to seize the destiny of the nation, it was proven that the people of Venezuela are fit to live in freedom, to govern themselves and to reconquer their destiny with their own free will³⁰.

Contrasting the last two periods in our political development –from 1958 to 1999, and from 1999 until today– illustrates how the Bolivarian Revolution is both “old” insofar as it repeats vices from the past, and “new” as it formed an unprecedented civil republic in our history. This fact is of enormous transcendence for our fight for freedom. The generation that managed to establish a civil republic, just like the current generation will also manage to do so, achieved democracy “by way of pain”³¹. A path of pain that, as it happens today, also faced arbitrariness, pride, repression, destruction and hatred. It is foolish, therefore, to ignore their testimony and disregard the bases on which they managed to prevail in the struggle. Caldera considered it necessary for new generations concerned about the destiny of their homeland to acknowledge the process that served as the basis and foundation of democratic institutions by the will of our people³², so that they can better value the effort of national understanding, of harmony between former contenders, of sum of wills, which was the initial sign of Venezuelan democracy³³. The path taken by the only generation in Venezuela that managed to defeat the *caudillista* tradition and that established a stable democratic system which responded to the people’s desire to seek their future in freedom is

30 Caldera, *De Carabobo a Puntofijo*, 129

31 “Del mismo sufrimiento y la misma esperanza” in *El bloque latinoamericano* (Mérida: Universidad de los Andes, 1966), 86. Caldera’s original expression was: “*Hemos venido de nuevo al ejercicio democrático y hemos llegado a él por el camino del dolor*”.

32 “Una aventura llamada COPEI”, pamphlet (Caracas: Publicaciones del Partido Socialcristiano COPEI, 1981), 14

33 *Ibid.*, 13

the most valuable lesson that our history offers to those who must prevail today against a new tyranny.

Beyond totalitarian destruction

Resuming the course of anamnesis implies re-encountering the principles and values around which the nation was united during the civil republic. The national unity that encouraged the so-called “January 23 spirit” required the commitment of all political forces to see beyond their respective positions to converge on the set of principles –truths– that had to be the common and uncontroversial foundation of Venezuelan democracy. According to Caldera, the “January 23 spirit” was, in dire but exciting moments, a movement of unity within plurality, of convergence amid divergences, of common purpose to face the danger of moving back in time, or to the past shipwreck of noble intentions amid the lurks of barbarism³⁴. Each individual was to promote their values and vision of the country, but no political force would be unaware, for instance, of the fact that a political project can never be above the human being for politics is called to serve man, or that human dignity is the starting point of politics, that freedom is indispensable for the authentic development of the human person, and that social justice is a fundamental requirement for the common good.

As explained in the explanatory statement of the draft for the constitution that the Bicameral Commission presented to the Legislative Chambers in 1961, the purpose was to write a fundamental text that did not represent partial points of view, but rather the basic principles of national political life in which

34 “El espíritu del 23 de enero”, pamphlet (Caracas: Imprenta del Congreso de la República, 1989), 17.

there could be convergence of thoughts and opinions in the vast majority. Caldera affirmed that the most important concept in the Constitution was that of the consensus necessary for pluralist democracy to take hold and strengthen itself, amid the incessant controversy that its very dialectical structure fosters among different political forces. He insisted that consensus must be guarded, and restored if lost; it had to be enriched through dialogue, which implies a willingness to listen, an inclination to value and accept everything that contributes to the benefit of all and to the satisfaction of the highest national interests, no matter the sector it came from³⁵. The founders of the civil republic understood then that the Constitution should belong to all Venezuelans because, as explained by Juan Carlos Rey, the fact that a certain numerical majority formally approves a Constitution will not guarantee the existence of a true constitutional political order if its content is not known and accepted by an important part of the citizenry, which should exceed, by far, the simple majority. He also brings to memory the fact that all the great natural law theorists, from Hobbes to Rousseau, considered that for the legitimacy of a fundamental decision, such as the approval of the original social contract, the favorable vote of the majority of the citizens was not enough, for unanimity was required³⁶.

Thus, the doctrinal principles of the 1961 Constitution, set out in its preamble, constituted the backbone of a legal system called to keep the ground within which the different criteria were confronted and positive contributions were added. Only with the solemn adherence of all democratic forces to the principles that underlie a plural democracy, added Caldera, could one fight

35 "A 15 años de la Constitución Venezolana", pamphlet (Caracas; Ediciones del Congreso de la República, 1976), 25.

36 See "Constitución y Poder Constituyente en el proyecto político de Hugo Chávez", *SIC LXX*, N° 697 (agosto 2007): 307-316

against the most ominous of the past, against the remnants of assault and adventurism³⁷.

When considering the spiritual scope of totalitarian destruction, we previously stated that reconstituting the nation's *ethos* could be an even more arduous task than the immense work of material reconstruction: rediscovering the truths that support democracy means not only banishing the totalitarian distortion of morals in the soul of the nation, but also confronting a cultural reality that goes far beyond our borders, a result of the relativistic conception of democracy that has managed to become the *Weltanschauung* of our times. The modern concept of democracy seems to be inextricably linked with relativism, which is presented as the true guarantee of freedom³⁸. In this context, any appeal to the truth is accused of being against democracy, since it would no longer be a public good, but an exclusively private good. The radical relativist position separates the concepts of good and truth from politics, considering them detrimental to freedom. Democracy is then conceived in a purely formal way: as a framework of rules that makes the formation of majorities and the transmission and alternation of power possible³⁹.

Yet Pope John Paul II insisted that "a true democracy" is not only the result of a formal respect for the rules, but rather the fruit of the convinced acceptance of the values that inspire democratic procedures: the dignity of every person, the respect for human rights, the assumption of the common good as an end and regulatory criterion of political life. When the general consensus on these values is broken, the stability of democracy is seriously

37 "Discurso de Rafael Caldera en el acto solemne de la firma de la Constitución el 23 de enero de 1961" (Caracas: Imprenta Nacional, 1961), 10-11.

38 Ratzinger, 84.

39 Ibid., 84-85.

compromised because, as there are no truths about the humane that guide political action, human ideas and convictions can be easily exploited for purposes of power, whereby democracy can become a visible or hidden totalitarianism, as history shows⁴⁰. According to Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, the truth is not a product of politics (the verdict of the majority, for example); rather, truth proceeds and illuminates it. He states that praxis does not create the truth, but rather that the truth is what makes correct praxis possible; and that politics is fair and promotes freedom when it serves a system of truths and rights that reason shows to man⁴¹.

In the midst of this effort to achieve anamnesis in order to re-find ourselves as a nation, we cannot avoid the questions that Benedict XVI asks democracies, as well as the answer he offers: Is it not necessary that there is a non-relativistic nucleus also in democracy? Has democracy not been ultimately built to guarantee human rights, which are inviolable? Are not the guarantee and the assurance of human rights the deepest reason for the need for democracy? Human rights are not subjected to the commandment of pluralism and tolerance; they are the content of tolerance and freedom. **That means that truth –namely, ethical truth– seems to be inalienable for democracy⁴².**

The totalitarianism of the Bolivarian Revolution has led the country to the darkest of its past, to a misery and desolation perhaps even worse than what the country suffered during the years of the Federal War in the 19th century. However, if Venezuela is able to overcome relativistic pressure and re-find the moral foundation of democracy as a way of life in the effort to rebuild itself, the nation could place itself at the vanguard of Latin America once

40 Juan Pablo II, *Centesimus annus*, n. 46

41 Ratzinger, 86.

42 Ibid., 84-85 (highlights of our own).

again. As it already did in the fight for independence, Venezuela could clear the way to freedom by showing fellow countries, whose democracies succumb to relativism, the future course they will have to take in order to avoid falling prey to the totalitarian threat that hangs increasingly ominous above the hemisphere.

Totalitarianism, kleptocracy and pandemic: the crossroads of power in Venezuela

Miguel Ángel Martínez Meucci

This chapter combines three lines of argument. The first addresses the current global trend towards the the weakening of liberal democracy, stressing that the attack on its liberal component is precisely what could prompt an eventual resurgence of totalitarian logics of power. The second second discusses the way in which said totalitarian threat has been surging in Venezuela since the beginning of the 21st century through a logic of power that is increasingly related to organized crime. Finally, some comments are made about the way in which the previous trends, considered in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, could evolve in current day Venezuela.

1. Global context: decline of liberal democracy and resurgence of the totalitarian threat

Today, as the third decade of the 21st century begins, there seems to be a general consensus on the downturn of liberal, modern and representative democracy. The proliferation of

“populisms”¹, “hybrid regimes”² and “authoritarian reversals”³ has been widely discussed in political sciences. In our case, we are interested in emphasizing that all these phenomena have a common denominator: the progressive consolidation of a political will that tries to escape the limits and controls of a constitutional regime, where the rights and freedoms of people are protected by the rule of the law, and the powers of the State maintain a healthy separation.

The fact that the democracy of our time necessarily has a representative, liberal and constitutional character tends to be forgotten. Ever since the constitutional debates held by the so-called “Founding Fathers” of the United States of America, concerned as they were with the recovery of a form of government that had been reviled by the tradition of Western political thought, the problem of modern democracy has been –and continues to be– tempering the fickle opinions of the popular will (be it violated or

- 1 See, for example, Kurt Weyland, “Latin America’s Authoritarian Drift: The Threat from the Populist Left”, *Journal of Democracy* 24 (3): 18-32, 2013; Cas Mudde & Cristóbal Rovira, “Populism. A Very Short Introduction”, Oxford University Press, 2017; and Roger Eatwell & Matthew Goodwin, “National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy”, UK: Penguin Random House, 2018.
- 2 See Larry Diamond, “Elections Without Democracy: Thinking About Hybrid Regimes”, *Journal of Democracy* 13 (2): 21-35, April 2002; Steven Levitsky & Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*, Cambridge University Press, 2010; and Steven Levitsky & Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, New York: Crown Publishing, 2017.
- 3 See Larry Diamond, “Facing Up to the Democratic Recession”, *Journal of Democracy*, 26 (1): 141-155, 2015; Marc Plattner, “Liberal Democracy’s Fading Allure”, *Journal of Democracy* 28 (4): 5-14, 2017; Nancy Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding”, *Journal of Democracy* 27 (1): 5-19, 2016; Roberto Foa & Yasha Mounk, “The Signs of Deconsolidation”. *Journal of Democracy* 28 (1): 5-15, 2017; Anna Lührmann & Staffan Lindberg, “A Third Wave of Autocratization is Here: What is New About It?”, *Democratization* 26 (7): 1095-1113, 2019.

even implemented by the current rulers) by putting into practice liberal principles such as the limitation and division of State powers through their institutional subjection to the rule of law.

It was possibly Tocqueville who best understood the friction between the rule of the majority and the need to subject it to the empire of a constitutional regime, a possibility that, according to him, had to be based on certain types of values and customs which favored freedom. But today, when no one dares to question the validity of the majority rule as the essence of democracy, there are many who direct their criticism towards the specifically liberal component of modern democracies. According to these, today's democracy must become more democratic and less liberal; it must empower the *demos* and detract from the powers of a State of Law that, according to them, prevents the free play of politics and the consequent advance of popular demands.

These tendencies, which can be described as illiberal or antiliberal, can be exacerbated to an initially unsuspected degree. What manifests itself through populism and hybrid regimes at relatively moderate levels, in the worst and most exceptional cases, can lead to totalitarian dynamics. In this sense, unlike what happens with many conventional or militaristic authoritarianisms –which tend to directly suppress the rule of the majority–, totalitarianism is always presented as rooted by massive popular support, and therefore it appears to embody the unappealable voice of the majority. However, the concept of totalitarianism is so associated with certain specific events that, very often, it is taken for a historical fact and not as a concept that is still active in political science and theory⁴. Sometimes its use is also reserved

4 Miguel Á. Martínez Meucci, "Totalitarismo: ¿un concepto vigente?", *Episteme NS* 31, (July-Dec. 2011): 45-78.

only to name a certain type of political regime, as a particularly intense form of authoritarianism, while neglecting its enormous explanatory ability to understand certain logics of power. This is often the case with numerous political scientists, often focused on providing an operational definition of totalitarianism based on a list of characteristics⁵.

The comprehensive capacity of the concept of totalitarianism is not exhausted in this variety of “check lists” offered by political science. Political philosophy –not without the help of other disciplines– has used the term to explore the deep nature of the typical discomforts of late modernity. This reveals the distressing relationship that exists between democracy and totalitarianism, a dynamic that stems from the revolutionary and modern dream of creating more egalitarian societies, but that sometimes ends up being interpreted as mere mechanical production of “new men”. This aspiration reaches the point of trying to achieve said unity through processes of social homogenization (*Gleichshaltung*) that, when promoted by certain sectors and organizations, encompass certain *endogroups* (race, class, etc.) and exonerate *exogroups* (the inferior races, class enemies, etc.). The desired goal is perfect unity, in communion with a supposed truth that is taken for absolute, and –through what Popper called a “utopian social engineering” – an experiment is conducted with human beings to achieve uniformity.

5 These typical features vary according to authors, yet usually the ones taken into account are listed by: Carl Friedrich & Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship & Autocracy*, Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1968 [1956]; Juan Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000; Leonard Shapiro, *Totalitarianism*, London: Pall Mall Press, 1972; and Sujian Guo, “The Totalitarian Model Revisited”, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 31, 3 (1998): 271-285; among others.

This type of process does not take place overnight, but rather over time through the increasing predominance of certain ideas and social drives. A sort of *totalitarian logic* is generated –a mixture of beliefs, force-ideas and political practices that necessarily precede totalitarian regimes, but which, fortunately, do not always lead to their installation. The social reconfiguration that totalitarian logic seeks often derives the mechanical and linear interpretation of principles that have emerged in the context of modernity and its great revolutions. This deformation of the valuable principles of the Enlightenment seems to be related to the progressive loss of a sense of ultra-worldly transcendence, the growing prominence of the “mass-man” and the proliferation of technical means. Totalitarianism seems to express once again that “call of the tribe”⁶ or existential anguish of human individuals’ condition –not at all natural– which, for better and worse, has been promoted in the modern world. Totalitarianism embodies, so to speak, an atavistic and tribal impulse, but rationalized and technified.

Totalitarian logic tends to proscribe the intrinsic plurality of the political world, and so it promotes a fairly structured ideology, although diffuse because it needs to adjust to the words of the maximum and charismatic leader. Such an ideology is fueled by propaganda and reinforced by the more or less generalized terror that various repressive organs instill. Totalitarian repression is not usually carried out by the military, but rather is exercised through the punctual and selective actions of the secret police and

6 Pointed out by authors such as Karl Popper, *La sociedad abierta y sus enemigos* (Barcelona: Paidós Surcos, 2006 [1945]); Friedrich Hayek, *Camino de servidumbre* (Madrid: Alianza, 2007 [1944]); Ana Teresa Torres, *La herencia de la tribu* (Caracas: Editorial Alfa, 2009); and Mario Vargas Llosa, *La llamada de la tribu*, (Madrid: Alfaguara, 2018).

paramilitary groups. As pointed out by Arendt⁷, totalitarianism always unfolds as a movement and never loses that character, which is why it does not cease in the creation of organizations parallel to the formal structure of the State and in the mobilization of political cadres and ordinary individuals. Its particular “lack of form” contrasts with the idea of those who attribute it a perfect bureaucratic organization.

Just as totalitarianism seems to emerge as a confusion of the egalitarian dream of modern revolutions, it also seems to be tied to the Promethean optimism of industrial revolutions and their inherent technical advances. Totalitarianism is expressed and exercises its dominance through the most recent technological innovations, from those related to the media and information to those related to genetic engineering and robotization, through the improvement of bureaucratic administration. The characteristic *modus* in which totalitarian domination alters our understanding of reality, distorting our ability to access information and the possibility of subjecting it to public scrutiny, is potentially verifiable today through the ease with which we deliberately spread fake news, memes, slogans and superficial ideas. What was previously achieved through centralized control of information can now be –perhaps– achieved through the adulteration of free flows of data and news. The risk involved in handling this information increases considerably when it falls into a few hands, as indicated by questions to major western networks such as Google, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. But the situation can be even worse when such control is exercised by authoritarian States such as current day China, where Western social networks are restricted, instead forcing the use of national or “autochthonous” ones (WeChat,

7 See Hannah Arendt, *Los orígenes del totalitarismo* (Madrid: Alianza, 2006 [1948]), 538.

QQ, QZone, Weibo, Baidu Tieba, etc.), which allow the Chinese government to collect and integrate all kinds of information about its citizens and implement biopolitical control systems over them⁸.

Why is there a disposition to fall into this type of regimes as oppressive as totalitarian ones? Possibly because they reinforce collective identities, consolidating the sense of belonging of the most fragile individuals to a community. The feeling of protection that this generates, together with the reduction of the weight of individual responsibility, is accompanied by campaigns directed against scapegoats, alleged causes of all ills. This ends up being sufficient incentive to cede absolute control to the State. The logic “*dello Stato totale*” –as Mussolini liked to say– is usually applauded by those who consider that only the State will be able to offer happiness, a happiness that is apparently prevented only by others, the same ones that must be submitted or eliminated.

The 1930s remind us how the great collective frustrations and the search for massive protection –apparently provided by the mobilization and the force deployments of the *squadristi* and by strong and omnipresent States– are the best fuels for totalitarian temptation. At that time, the aftermath of the First World War and the so-called “Spanish flu”, the great inflations and the Great Depression, as well as the massive demand for State protection and the discrediting of liberal ideas, not only led to the rise of nationalist, populist and authoritarian movements and leaders in

8 Larry Diamond, when speaking of a possible “post-modern totalitarianism”, states: “What if a government not only wants to know everything there is to know digitally about all its citizens, but also has the means to collect it and analyze it? That, increasingly, is the Orwellian world which we are entering”. In “The Road to Digital Unfreedom. The Threat of Postmodern Totalitarianism”, *Journal of Democracy* 30, 1 (January 2019): 22.

various countries, but also of the first totalitarian regimes. At that time, the aspiration for social equality and the idea of inalienable rights were already deeply rooted in the population, but the results were still far from having substantially improved the living conditions of broad layers of the population. Under such conditions, the strength and protection that the State seemed to offer, erected as a new tribal binder, seemed almost irresistible. The results of such dynamics are the main political lessons that the 20th century has left us. However, the temptation to stumble over the same stones is still present and seems to have been recently renewed.

2. Nature of the regime in Venezuela: totalitarian and gangster logic

Talking about totalitarianism in today's Venezuela may be puzzling at a first glance. However, there are good grounds for this. On the one hand, the characterization of Chavismo has always been problematic, given that this movement-regime has gone through different phases and shown different facades over time. Indeed, Chavismo has embodied issues as varied as a conspiracy military lodge, a populist and/or multi-class electoral coalition, a revolutionary movement, a hegemonic socialist party, a military establishment government, etc. That changing and multifaceted character is what has led to multiple characterizations by social scientists, each of which has tended to highlight certain traits that are present (populists, militarists, revolutionaries, socialists, etc). From our point of view, none of these characterizations has, by itself, fully accounted for the deepest and most essential nature of the Chavista phenomenon.

We consider that all these denominations can be understood as parts of a *totalitarian logic* that has continued to unfold over time, understanding this concept as has been exposed in previous pages. A review of the various totalitarian regimes that have existed to date shows those same features combined within the same logic of univocal, distinctive and particular power in almost all of them. This logic is characterized by a treatment that is increasingly less attentive to human and citizen dignity, less respectful of personal freedom, and more oriented towards exhaustive control of the population which is made possible through ideology, State capacities, various technical resources, and the standardizing of wills. For totalitarianism, the acquiescence of the population is not enough: it seeks fervent adherence and its constant mobilization. Individuals, as well as any gesture derived from their moral autonomy, are suffocated under the weight of totalitarian homogenization, which advances as it destroys the uses, customs, associations and institutions of society. Even after taking control of the State, totalitarianism never stops working as a movement, since its nature is to project itself incessantly towards a mythical or utopian stage never quite achievable⁹. Additionally, the foreign policy of a regime of these characteristics is usually expansive and challenging, equivalent to that of a *revolutionary state*¹⁰ and oriented towards the imposition of new international

9 Zdenek Mylnář states that authentic totalitarianism is established when the unlimited use of terror no longer has a reason for being, that is, when individuals have completely lost their autonomy. Heteronomy is now pursued “cybernetically”, interrupting the flow of information about both the outside world and the past, but overly tolerating intersubjective relationships only when they occur through power-controlled circuits. Cited by Simona Forti in *Totalitarismo: trayectoria de una idea límite* (Barcelona: Herder, 2008), 112.

10 See David Armstrong, *Revolution and World Order: The Revolutionary State in International Society* (New York: Clarendon Press of Oxford University

standards, with which it is likely to be involved in visible diplomatic conflicts.

The characteristic features of totalitarianism provided by various authors in the field of political science have been summarized by Simona Forti¹¹. Virtually all these features are present in the Bolivarian Revolution's Venezuela, as embodied in the "nationalist, Bolivarian and socialist" (or national-socialist, in a certain sense) ideology; the presence of a clearly hegemonic party (PSUV); the role that Hugo Chavez's charismatic leadership

Press, 1993); and Miguel Á. Martínez Meucci, "La revolución liberal venezolana y su política exterior", *Análisis Político* 77, 1 (2013): 211-231.

- 11 These characteristic features are: a) a dominant, revolutionary ideology, which expresses its faith in the necessary laws of history, and which proclaims the destruction of an old order and the emergence of another, radically new and pure; b) a partisan structure, led by a charismatic leader who declares himself infallible and demands an unconditional adherence by the masses; c) a chaotic redesign of positions and roles to generate rivalry and, therefore, dependence on the true seat of power; d) a collective economic system (capitalist or socialist), whose objective is to align the productive forces with the regime's autarchic and militaristic goals; e) total control over the mass media and the formulation of a rhetoric aimed at avoiding ambivalences or complexities; f) a permanent mobilization of the population through wars, conflicts or purges; g) the widespread use of terror through a secret police with the aim of isolating, intimidating and aligning any person or group that the regime perceives as a threat; h) the centrality of the objective enemy. Along the same lines, the persecution and elimination not only of real opponents but also, more clearly, of categories of people considered perverse by virtue of a certain established quality, such as their race or ancestry. Crimes against the State do not necessarily have to have been committed by the person accused of them; i) concentration camps, as a laboratory of totalitarian domination, as spaces to experiment under which conditions human beings become completely malleable. Additionally, a slave labor regime coexists with a policy of genocide of a racial or class character. In Simona Forti, *Totalitarismo, filosofía y biopolítica*, lecture delivered at the Centro de Estudios Públicos (Santiago de Chile, November 25, 2015), 131.

played for years; a “utopian social engineering” and the proliferation of official instances by the regime, often parallel to other existing structures; the economic model implemented (with increasing centralized control of the price system and of all instances of production and marketing of goods); the virtual monopoly of the media (through official, expropriated or co-opted means), through which direct or indirect control is exercised; the constant mobilization of the population in manifestations, countermanifestations, concentrations and militia training; terror caused by clandestine or secret actions by various security forces (FAES, CICPC, SEBIN, etc.); the hostile rhetoric from the State against various groups of the population, whether or not they are politically adverse to the regime; the presence of detention centers in which prisoners (usually political prisoners) are subjected to extreme conditions (“*La Tumba*”, etc.); and a labor regime under which the effort of the worker does not maintain any acceptable relation with their remuneration, stimulating emigration and displacement among millions of people.

By virtue of these and other lines of thought (not only of a nomothetic-analytical nature, but also ideographic-hermeneutic), the argument that affirms the totalitarian character of the Venezuelan regime of the last two decades has been sustained and developed –with important variations in each case– by various Venezuelan academics¹². In fact, at the time these paper

12 Carlos Kohn & Rodolfo Rico (comp.), *El totalitarismo del siglo XXI. Una aproximación desde Hannah Arendt* (Vicerrectorado Académico de la Universidad Central de Venezuela, 2009); Francisco Plaza, *El silencio de la democracia* (Caracas: CEC, Los Libros de El Nacional, 2010); Miguel Á. Martínez Meucci, *ibidem*, 2011; Miguel Á. Martínez Meucci, *Apaciguamiento. El referéndum revocatorio y la consolidación de la Revolución Bolivariana* (Caracas: Editorial Alfa, 2012); Miguel Á. Martínez Meucci, “Democracia totalitaria: apuntes desde el caso venezolano”, in *El lugar de la gente. Comunicación, espacio público y democracia deliberativa en*

is being written, the totalitarian character of this domination seems to have reached the level indicated by Mylnař in the aforementioned fragment in certain sectors of the population. However, the recent proliferation of characterizations that allude to the Chavista regime as *gangster*, *kleptocratic* or *mafia* is based on increasingly abundant evidence, with which it seems necessary to ask whether the Bolivarian Revolution is essentially a gangster rather than a totalitarian regime. From our point of view, this question is best answered if, instead of seeking a characterization of *political regimes*, one understands rather the type of *power logics* prevailing in either case. Given that the concept of *totalitarian logic of power* has been explained in previous pages, it is now necessary to outline what we understand by *mafia*, *gangster* or a *criminal logic of power* (that is, that exercised by those in charge of gangster or kleptocratic States)¹³. It is useful to be guided by ideal types that allow highlighting differences and characterizing schematically. Such ideal types are synthesized in Table 1.

Venezuela, ed Carlos Delgado Flores (Caracas: Ediciones de la UCAB, 2014), 15-31; Miguel Albuja, "El neototalitarismo en el escenario político latinoamericano: nuevas tecnologías hegemónicas de control, terrorismo y conspiración", *Episteme* NS 33, 2 (2013): 89-110; Ariel Segal, "Totalitarismo, dictadura y autoritarismo: Definiciones y re-definiciones", *Revista gobierno y gestión pública* 1,1 (2013): 1-37; José Javier Blanco, "El poder totalitario, el caso de la revolución bolivariana", *Revista MAD* 34 (2016): 65-105; José Javier Blanco, *Repensando la teoría política del totalitarismo* (Caracas: Equinoccio, 2019). Meanwhile, Humberto García Larralde, in "El fascismo del siglo XXI. La amenaza totalitaria del proyecto político de Hugo Chávez Frías" (Caracas: Debate, 2009) considers the regime created by Hugo Chávez as "neo-fascist", arguing that its alleged leftist or progressive character is not truly such.

13 For a complete characterization of these regimes, see Katherine Hirschfeld, *Gangster States. Organized Crime, Kleptocracy and Political Collapse* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

Table 1: Comparison of totalitarian and mafia power logics

Context	Totalitarian logic	Mafia logic
Political performance	Strong ideological burden. Presence of a maximum and messianic leader. Tries to reach a single-party situation. High levels of mobilization.	Ideological burden not necessarily high. More diffuse leadership. Cooptation of the opposition; it does not need a single party. Low mobilization.
Administrative activities	Proliferation of parastatal institutions. Centralization of decisions. "Utopian social engineering" (Popper, 2006).	Co-opting, through bribery or extortion, of public officials. Neglect of all things unprofitable.
Social goals	Search for homogenization (<i>Gleichschaltung</i>) that eliminates individual autonomy.	It focuses on the control and exploitation of the population. Predatory attitude.
Economic policies	Control and centralization of economic processes. An anti-utilitarian character that seems irrational often prevails.	Creation of "gray areas", suitable for undue profit. State operates as a large set of extractive <i>alcabalas</i>
Attitude towards legal aspects	A constant legitimization of his political project is proposed by legal means. It is accompanied by a certain "constitutive drive".	It is enough for him to give an appearance of legality to his acts. It accommodates the functioning of the judicial system to specific objectives.

Police-Military	It seeks to develop a respectable military capacity, which usually includes civilian or para-military militias. Secret police is essential.	It tends to create "private armies", thus risking the loss of the State's monopoly on violence. Often several "capos" arise.
Foreign policy	"Extroverted", typical of revolutionary states (Armstrong, 1993). Violent uses and poses new dynamics to the other states. It tends to promote diplomatic conflicts due to its tendency to expand its control.	Rather "discreet", it protects the overlapping creation of links of transnational organized crime under the protection of state sovereignty. It can give rise to diffuse conflicts, generally of medium or low intensity.

Source: own elaboration.

Initially, it should be noted that mafia logic is distinguished from totalitarian logic by its low ideological burden, as well as by the fact that its main motivation –purely utilitarian– is profit and not the creation of a “new society” based on an ideology. In mafia logic, any attitude towards justice, the common good or a certain political position is rather instrumental. The legitimate regulatory function of the State is used as a mechanism of undue coercion and as a convenient cloak of legality, to the point that public security organs come to function *de facto* as true armed sectors of the particular groups that control the public. Similarly, the State apparatus degenerates into an immense set of *alcabalas*, ideal to fleece the common citizen. Corrupted public officials of all ranks, with no limits other than their own rivalries, coordinate to design a legislative and bureaucratic framework conducive to

committing lucrative crimes, such as extortion, smuggling and collusion.

The mafia logic, therefore, is oriented towards the creation of “gray areas”¹⁴ in which the border between legality and illegality is not always clear, which is very convenient for organized crime actions. This logic is less concerned than the totalitarian logic with the formation of a single party, to the point that it may even be convenient for it to exist, co-opt and control various sectors of the political opposition. Rather than centralizing economic functions, the mafia regime is interested in an exploitation regime that can contemplate cooperation between corrupt private and public sectors. Meanwhile, the administration of public services is often neglected, with the understanding that the population will be willing to pay additionally for each service they do not receive on a regular basis. In the worst case, security forces and paramilitaries function more as “private armies” than as public organs.

It is clear that mafias can operate in both democratic and autocratic States. However, democratic and even autocratic States tend to persecute and punish organized crime organizations because they violate their authority (forcing them to operate in the shade and with maximum secrecy). Meanwhile, the organs of public power in a mafia State are controlled by gangster logic: the leaders themselves –whether they have been popularly elected or not– are integrated into the criminal plot and so it becomes a State-run operation. Not only do criminals no longer face any persecution or harassment by internal organs or actors

14 The notion has been used by Gaïdz Minassian, *Zones grises. Quand les États perdent le contrôle* (Paris: Autrement, 2011); and by Pierre Pascallon, *Les zones grises dans le monde aujourd'hui* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 2016).

with political power, but they even develop an open rhetoric of threat and extortion as an essential part of their public discourse. When a voluminous State apparatus –and/or what Popper called “closed societies”¹⁵– is added to the condition of mafia or gangster State, the mechanisms of looting increase significantly compared to what happens in open societies or smaller States.

Generally, this extreme is only reached after the progressive involvement of the gangster State in transnational mafia, especially when it comes to rather small countries. It is a situation that is repeated, particularly, in several of the multiple nations that emerged after the decolonization processes in the middle of the 20th century or after the collapse of the USSR. Hence, the foreign policy of a mafia regime is oriented towards cultivating the links of transnational organized crime under the protective cloak of national sovereignty. Unlike what happens with totalitarianism, the leaders of a gangster state are not usually interested in the possibility of being involved in international conflicts, although the nature of their activities –violating international law and multiple uses and widely shared customs– tends to generate a diffuse and low-intensity conflict with other countries.

All this begs the question about the true character of the Chavista regime (totalitarian or gangster?): Is the power logic of the Bolivarian Revolution primarily oriented towards a process of suppression of pluralism, social homogenization and annulment of citizens’ autonomy to consolidate a single project of power (totalitarian logic), or rather towards the articulation of forces and interests focused primarily on undue profit and the extraction/accumulation of wealth (gangster logic)? (As we will see later, the answer to this question is equivalent to determining whether

15 Karl Popper, *ibidem*, 2006.

any properly political will prevails in the current Venezuelan regime, or whether there is a drive based purely on the profit of the ruling elite. We will take it one step at a time).

Determining with certainty to which logic the Venezuelan regime responds with greater force would be the subject of a detailed study, expressly developed in relation to the previous variables and according to a specific methodology. However, the continuous and detailed study of current Venezuelan reality, supported by multiple specialists in various areas, allows several preliminary conjectures to be made. First, it is clear that the regime established by Chavismo shows characteristics of these two logics of power. Now, while the characteristics of a totalitarian logic seemed to predominate during Hugo Chávez's government (1999-2012), the elements of a mafia logic are the most visible during Nicolás Maduro's period (2013-2019). Purely "political" behaviors, such as the emphasis on "Bolivarian-socialist" ideology or on revolutionary diplomatic activity, seemed to have a comparatively greater weight during Chávez's government, while the growing denunciations of Chavismo associations with transnational organized crime have proliferated, especially during Maduro's stay in power. The general trend therefore seems to point to the progressive disarticulation of the institutional, social and cultural framework of the nation, increasingly replaced by parallel organizations related to the party-State and by multiple "gray areas" in which –as has been pointed out by various authors– drug trafficking, smuggling, extortion, kidnapping, money laundering and the indiscriminate extraction of natural resources proliferate¹⁶.

16 Several sources can be consulted on the matter: 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

Now, from our point of view, the undoubted presence and consolidation of this criminal logic in recent years not only does not contradict the effective influence of the totalitarian logic referred to here, but could even be a consequence. This is explained by the dissolving impact that totalitarian logic has on the State's structure, institutions and society, a dissolution that is particularly evident in post-totalitarian States¹⁷, where all kinds of organized crime logic and actions tend to proliferate.

Independent Publishing Platform, 2015); Leonardo Coutinho, *Hugo Chávez, o espectro* (São Paulo: Vestígio, 2018); Crisis Group, "73 Report Latin America & Caribbean - Gold and Grief in the Venezuela's Violent South" (February 28, 2019); Douglas Farah & 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 Jonathan Rosen, Bruce Bagley & Jorge Chabat (eds), *The Criminalization of States. The Relationship between States and Organized Crime* (Lexington Books, 2019), 189-207; Geoff Ramsey & David Smilde, "Beyond the Narcostate Narrative: What U.S. Drug Trade Monitoring Data Says About Venezuela", Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), (March 11, 2020); Moisés Rendón & Arianna Kohan, "Identifying and Responding to Criminal Threats from Venezuela" (Washington: Center of Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), July 22, 2019); Antulio Rosales, "Venezuela's Deepening Logic of Extraction", *NACLA Report on the Americas* 49, 2 (2017): 132-135; and Marcos Tarre, "Seguridad Ciudadana", in Benigno Alarcón & Sócrates Ramírez (eds), *La consolidación de una transición democrática. El desafío venezolano III* (Caracas: UCAB Ediciones, 2018).

- 17 Forti (*ibidem*, 2008: 105) stated that, according to Walzer, if some elements revealed by "classic" authors are taken seriously –the permanent mobilization adopted by totalitarian terror, the tendency to totally destroy reality–, one must necessarily conclude that totalitarianisms are sinking due to an inevitable entropic force. They must necessarily transform into something less intense. To understand the specific case that Russia embodies regarding this post-totalitarian dynamic, see also Masha Gessen, *The Future is History. How Totalitarianism reclaimed Russia* (New York: Riverheads Books, 2017).

At times, it has been thought that totalitarianism is characterized by its supposed ability to establish a centralized and absolute order, when in reality it is characterized by its “lack of structure” –something to which we have already referred, citing Arendt–. The concrete effect of this model of domination is not only the dislocation of the function of the law and the breakdown of the traditional mechanisms of citizen association, but the fact that the State becomes completely permeated by logics that, far from responding to the public-private division, rather empower those who manage public issues to infiltrate within the most intimate dimensions of private issues, while at the same time using the public to serve themselves in purely particular terms.

Once the institutions of civil society are destroyed, neutralized, or co-opted, and the population’s capacity to react is suppressed, there is nothing to prevent the elites of the totalitarian party-State from abusing the extraordinary control acquired to procure a purely criminal profit, evading all responsibility regarding citizen welfare and acting as if they were *superfluous*¹⁸. It is extreme that the very notion of criminality –that which violates the law and the morality that it seeks to embody– loses its social meaning, while its reason for being is altered. It is well known that the disappearance of the rule of law, the regime of liberties and effective access to justice creates ideal conditions for the proliferation of regimes linked to crime¹⁹, an inference that seems to be reinforced once the gangster nature is recognized as a characteristic of several

18 The expression is taken from Arendt; see Arendt, *ibidem*, 2006.

19 As stated by Hung-En Sung, “State Failure, Economic Failure, and Predatory Organized Crime: A Comparative Analysis”, *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 41, 2 (2004): 111-129; and Jessica West, “The Political Economy of Organized Crime and State Failure: The Nexus of Greed, Need and Grievance”, *Innovations: A Journal of Politics* 6 (2006): 1-17.

countries that usually occupy the lowest positions in the Freedom House and Transparency International indices.

Consequently, a general hypothesis is proposed (whose verification could lead to a line of research), according to which *the evolution and decline of totalitarian regimes, evident in late totalitarian or post-totalitarian societies, generate conditions particularly prone to the proliferation of power logics characteristic of gangster or mafia States*. Is it an exclusive pattern of the so-called Bolivarian Revolution? Not precisely. Various studies on diverse cases in Eastern Europe, especially in Putin's Russia²⁰, abound in the characterization of the criminal and mafia dynamics that have become more sophisticated in these countries during and after the fall of communism²¹. Likewise, the several times denounced relationship between the Castro regime and drug trafficking²², or the complex money laundering schemes in which the North Korean regime apparently is involved²³, draw attention to the concomitant logics between totalitarian logics and gangster logics.

20 For example, James Finckenauer & Yuri Vorodin, "The Threat of Organized Russian Crime", (Washington DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 2001); Julián López Muñoz, "Criminalidad organizada. La mafia rusa y su estrategia de expansión" (Madrid: Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos (IEEE), 2015); Masha Gessen, *ibidem* 2017.

21 There are several similarities between the Russian and Venezuelan cases: cooperation between State officials and organized crime bosses; the "political" role played by the Russian *vory v zakone* and the Venezuelan *pranes*; and some actions carried out by organized crime agents who migrate to other countries.

22 See Eduardo Sáenz Rovner, *La conexión cubana. Narcotráfico, contrabando y juego en Cuba entre los años 20 y comienzos de la Revolución* (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Colección CES, 2005).

23 For example, Jay Solomon & Jason Dean "Heroin Busts Point to Source of Funds for North Koreans", *Wall Street Journal* (April 23, 2003) <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB105106006946882000> (consulted on April 19, 2020).

The foregoing becomes more explanatory for the Venezuelan case when certain “dirty business models” developed by the military in Venezuela²⁴ appear to be related or even to have been directly imported from countries such as Cuba or Russia²⁵. Just as it is not contradictory to characterize the Venezuelan regime as essentially totalitarian regarding its populist, militaristic, revolutionary or hybrid facets, it is also not necessarily contradictory to characterize it as a mafia or gangster regime, precisely because the totalitarian character integrates all those phenomena and behavior contrary to democracy, liberties and the rule of law.

There is still a pending question: *which elements are essential and which ones are instrumental in the relationship between totalitarian logic and mafia logic, in other words, between political will and profit drive in the Venezuelan case*. The previous dilemma is posed here based on what Saint Augustine already anticipated when detecting the fine line that exists between politics and organized crime²⁶. Politics,

24 As a recent example, you can consult the report: “Venezuela Military Head has Links to Companies, Real Estate in U.S., Venezuela worth Millions”, *The Miami Herald*, April 13, 2020. <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/venezuela/article241970616.html> (consulted on April 19, 2020).

25 To further on these relations with Cuba and Russia, you can consult, respectively: María Werlau, *Cuba’s Intervention in Venezuela: A Strategic Occupation with Global Implications* (USA: Neo Club Ediciones, 2019); and Alejandro Cardozo & Víctor Mijares, “Los lazos de corrupción entre Rusia y Venezuela. Una alianza con otros medios”, *Foreign Affairs Latinoamérica*, 19, 2 (2019): 64-74.

26 Paraphrasing Augustine of Hippo in *The City of God*, chapter 4, book IV: If we remove justice from governments, what do they become if not large-scale robber gangs? And these bands, what are they but small kingdoms? They are a group of men, they are ruled by a boss, they commit themselves in a mutual pact, they distribute the loot according to the law accepted by them.

beyond involving the willingness to exercise coercion, always revolves around some idea of justice, however precarious it may be; without it, the political community falls apart. Otherwise, it is an organization of a non-political nature. Criminal associations tend to be ephemeral because they are united only by the desire for undue profit, but those that last over time have come to be classified as proto-states, since they are articulated around codes of honor, practices of solidarity and relatively stable rules that allow them to rival the current political order.

Regarding the case at hand –that of the Bolivarian Revolution–, the task of solving the proposed dilemma exceeds the objectives set forth in this paper. For the moment, it is enough to state it, and to indicate the existence of this tension between two logics of power that, despite their differences, are not necessarily contradictory. In this sense, and depending on how this relationship is assumed, two fundamental possibilities emerge to describe the current situation in Venezuela. On the one hand, 1) if the mafia prevails over the totalitarian logic, the country could experience the progressive decline towards a phase of post-totalitarian features, a stage that if not translated into a change of regime –or at least in the recovery of the centrality of some kind of political logic– could lead the country towards a condition that combines features of a failed and gangster State. On the other hand, it could rather be the case that: 2) totalitarian logic prevails over mafia or gangsters; if so, instead of representing the essence of the Chavista regime, the mafia logic would play a rather instrumental role, useful for achieving the political objectives of the regime. This would not be a progressive decline of totalitarian logic, but rather a phase of its consolidation through mechanisms of organized crime²⁷.

27 An important reference to understand the type of rationality that could characterize a State of these characteristics is the famous book of Yehezkel

3. The global situation: eventual incidence of the pandemic on Venezuela

The ubiquitous threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic has awakened –or deepened– in various parts of the world the potentially totalitarian temptation to resort to all kinds of technical means to exercise domination that, in certain cases, extends to biopolitical control. The sanitary convenience of tracking people infected with this coronavirus, as well as the need to decree quarantines, have opened the doors for many governments to implement measures that clearly restrict individual freedoms. Similarly, the more or less widespread desire for public health systems capable of neutralizing the pandemic seems to have fueled, in several countries, the discourse of political actors demanding tax increases, greater powers for the states, and even expropriations of private assets.

This happens precisely at a time when the world is already experiencing a sustained drift towards the gorges of populism, hybrid regimes and authoritarian reversals. However, it is known that, in the face of imminent threats and of the proliferation of growing but unsatisfied expectations, societies tend to sacrifice freedom and autonomy in exchange for protection and security; that is, after all, the most elementary reason of being for the State, according to Hobbesian theory. Thus, the pandemic emergency is triggering a wave of claims in favor of State intervention, assumed as a savior and almighty. This trend has triggered arduous debates in various liberal democracies, while it represents the perfect opportunity for authoritarian governments to increase the abusive controls they already exert on the population.

Dror, *Crazy States. A Counterconventional Strategic Problem* (New York: Klaus Reprint, 1980 [1971]).

The latter seems to be the case in Venezuela in 2020. The official response to the pandemic threat –virtually impossible for a health care system in a country with a hospital network that has been greatly diminished as a result of the erratic policies of the Bolivarian Revolution– has focused on keeping people confined in their homes, as well as trying to block independent information mechanisms. It is obvious that such an approach to the crisis generates a particularly risky situation for those infected with COVID-19, an even greater risk than that already experienced by patients from other countries in somewhat more stable conditions. It is politically beneficial for a regime that needs to prevent interaction, organization and mobilization of a population notoriously dissatisfied with the –frankly deplorable– living conditions in which it has been subsisting.

The repressive and atomizing effect of these policies is increased by the already chronic inability to access the basic food basket that most of the population experiences²⁸, as well as by the increasing fuel shortage. It is truly paradoxical that, in an oil-generating country like Venezuela, the production of gasoline and diesel has been sustainedly declining, due to the structural deterioration of the hydrocarbon industry, irregular schemes of association with foreign companies, and US sanctions imposed since 2019 to PDVSA, the State-owned oil company.

28 According to the *Centro de Documentación y Análisis Social de la Federación Venezolana de Maestros* (CENDAS), the price of the family food basket in January 2020 increased 58.3% compared to the previous month, requiring 96.5 minimum wages to acquire it, while the minimum wage was at \$ 3.28 per month. See “Cendas-FVM: Canasta Básica Familiar de enero 2020 fue de Bs 24.139.128,44 (\$317,62)”, *Finanzas Digital*, February 19, 2020, <https://www.finanzasdigital.com/2020/02/cendas-fvm-canasta-basica-familiar-de-enero-2020-fue-bs-24-139-12844-31762/> (consulted April 19, 2020).

The pandemic arrives in Venezuela at a time when the country has already been experiencing a complex humanitarian crisis for several years –marked by the collapse of public services, the sustained economic debacle, the proliferation of organized crime and one of the biggest processes of emigration/displacement registered in the continent²⁹–, and in the midst of what some specialists call “multiple sovereignty”³⁰, that is, the struggle of two political forces to abrogate the State monopoly of the legitimate government. Each one of them, Juan Guaidó and Nicolás Maduro, has been recognized by an important group of foreign governments. While more than 50 democracies support the former, the latter is backed by very powerful autocratic governments and the effective use of armed force.

Despite the fact that on various occasions several negotiation schemes have been proposed between the opposing sides, so far none of them has produced significant results, beyond some escalation of the conflict on certain occasions. This is partly because the Venezuelan conflict is strongly linked to complex and antagonistic geopolitical agendas, corresponding not only to major powers such as the US, Russia and China, but also to countries with a more modest but strong global influence in the case of Venezuela (Cuba, Iran, Turkey, Colombia, Brazil, Great Britain and several other EU nations, such as France, Italy, Germany or Spain). As the agreement between these countries

29 By April 2020, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, as reported by host governments and recorded by the Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela, whose figures are used by UNHCR, amounted to 5,093,987 Venezuelans abroad. See <https://r4v.info/es/situations/platform> (consulted on April 19, 2020).

30 The concept, derived from Trotsky’s notion of “dual power”, is used by Charles Tilly; see *Las revoluciones europeas, 1492-1992*, Barcelona: Crítica, 1995.

has become impossible, the options for a negotiated exit within the country have also been complicated.

Likewise, the possibilities that the catastrophic social situation fuels a new great cycle of protests potentially capable of inducing a profound change in the political situation seem uncertain. Specialized literature considers this type of outbreak to be more likely in middle-income societies, with high expectations combined with an abrupt drop in purchasing power and a large proportion of unemployed young people³¹. This seemed to be the case in Venezuela in 2012-2018³², a period during which there were indeed two great cycles of protest (2014 and 2017) and consequent opportunities for political change. However, since then Venezuelan society has become brutally impoverished, and the average age of the population residing in the country seems to be declining –a consequence of the emigration of millions of young people and the working force–, with which the country enters a dangerous condition of extreme poverty that would be negatively related to the possibility of producing large protests with political impact³³. Additionally, the totalitarian logics of domination that have been exercised for years have had a strong impact on all kinds of political and intermediate associations in Venezuela (political parties, companies, civil associations, etc.), severely damaging the people's capacities to exercise autonomous collective actions with

31 See Ted Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970); and Jack A. Goldstone (ed.), *Revolutions. Theoretical, Comparative and Historical Studies* (Belmont: Wadsworth/ Thompson, 2003).

32 For example, Miguel Á. Martínez Meucci, "Cambio político en Venezuela 2013-2016: ¿transición, estado fallido o profundización revolucionaria?", in Benigno Alarcón & Miguel Á. Martínez Meucci (editores), *El desafío venezolano II: Transición democrática o autocratización revolucionaria* (Caracas: UCAB Ediciones, 2016), 99-140.

33 See Paul Collier, *Guerra en el club de la miseria* (Madrid: Turner Noema, 2009).

potential impact on the political scene. Hence, from 2018 to date, the greatest pressure exerted on Maduro's regime of totalitarian vocation has come, mainly, from foreign governments such as the US, Canada and countries from the Lima Group and the European Union, rather than internal pressures.

At the moment, the trend towards demobilization of the population has only increased –not only in Venezuela, but worldwide– during the pandemic crisis, which is still an important opportunity for autocratic regimes³⁴. Our tentative and conjunctural conclusion, therefore, is that the current crossroads of power in Venezuela (in which totalitarian and kleptocratic logics intersect in the midst of a global context marked by a generalized democratic reversal and a pandemic of great proportions) does not offer neither clear trends nor perspectives for a political change favorable to the redemocratization of the country. Fortunately, politics is the empire of contingency; the area where –more than in any other– will and fortune often work miracles. Now, more than ever, it is time to overcome adverse circumstances.

34 See Samuel Brannen, "Will Covid-19 End the Age of Mass Protests?" (Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), April 7, 2020). <https://www.csis.org/analysis/will-covid-19-end-age-mass-protests> (consulted on April 19, 2020).

Challenges faced by political parties in Venezuela

Paola Bautista de Alemán

The weakening of the democratic system in Venezuela began decades before the electoral victory of the Chavista Revolution on December 6, 1998. Numerous investigations have been published in this regard¹. Unintentionally, and because it is part of our reality, we have been pioneers in the study of populism, a phenomenon which awakens the political and intellectual curiosity of many.

The autocratic advance of Chavismo has been gradual². It has expanded little by little. Venezuelans have witnessed the installation of a dictatorship that reduced democracy and instrumentalized its mechanisms to achieve its goals of domination. After twenty years in power, it has put an end to the legacy of democracy in our country, inaugurated in 1958. No

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- 1 As a suggestion, the extensive literature that was published in Venezuela in the 1980s and 1990s can be reviewed, especially the studies by Miriam Kornblith, Aníbal Romero, Alan Brewer Carías, Juan Carlos Rey, and Jennifer McCoy. The political speeches of President Rómulo Betancourt (February, 1981), President Rafael Caldera (March 1, 1989, and February 4, 1992) and Luis Castro Leiva (January 23, 1999) might also be of interest.
 - 2 See Juan Miguel Matheus, "The gradual nature of the dismantling of the rule of law in Venezuela." in *Democratization* (Caracas: Instituto Forma. 2019. Year 1- Number 2) 6-47.

domain has been exempt from its attacks. Perhaps there is where its totalitarian essence lies³...

In *Challenges faced by political parties in Venezuela*, the effect that the autocratic advance of the Chavista revolution has had on the internal dynamics of political parties will be studied, especially those that fight for democracy in the country. The article is composed by three sections: 1. The centrality of political parties in Venezuelan political culture, 2. Three effects of the procedural reduction of democracy, 3. Challenges faced by political parties. The perspective offered in this paper is not merely scientific. Far from proposing definitive ideas, it reflects upon the political experience of the author.

The centrality of political parties in Venezuelan political culture

Political parties are any political group that participates in elections and that can propose its candidates to public office through elections⁴. They can be of different ideological signs and have particular systems. Party systems are the result of numerous

3 The totalitarian nature of the Chavista revolution has been a matter of debate since its beginnings. Perhaps the lack of consensus around its autocratic essence has been one of the main issues of dissent among those who make up the democratic opposition. As I have expressed in previous articles, I consider that this discussion is not a minor matter. Identifying the nature of the regime is important because it can offer keys to political action. Far from being an intellectual curiosity, it is a real fact that can inform decision-making processes. To delve deeper into the totalitarian nature of the Chavista revolution, I recommend reading the studies by Francisco Plaza (*The Silence of Democracy*, 2011) and the communications by the Venezuelan Episcopal Conference from 2014.

4 Giovanni Sartori, *Partidos y sistemas de partidos* (Madrid: Alianza editorial, 2005), 101.

and complex factors, some specific to each country and other general ones⁵, such as the cultural and historical context in the case of the former, and the electoral regime in the case of the latter. Political parties were originated in the 19th century together with mass democracies and, as explained by Duverger⁶, they were developed under the influence of the culture and tradition of each place. This section describes the centrality of political parties as formative institutions which allowed and facilitated the democratic development of the country in the 20th century.

On July 5, 1811, Venezuela gained its independence from the Spanish Empire. Months later, it sanctioned its first Constitution. The new Republic fluctuated. The 19th century was difficult: the War of Independence, the Gran Colombia and its dissolution, the creation of the State of Venezuela in 1830, men on horseback, the Federal War, and confrontations between *caudillos*. The 20th century began under the dictatorship of Juan Vicente Gómez, who remained in power until death defeated him.

A new phase began in 1936. After the death of Gómez, a slow process of reforms towards democracy was set forth, supervised by men of the dictatorship. The proposal failed to convince or satisfy the different political forces in the country, and in 1945 the path was thwarted. A *coup d'état* led by *Acción Democrática* and members of the Armed Forces took over power, and the process of democratization was accelerated. According to Juan Carlos Rey, this moment sets forth the creation of mass political parties in Venezuela, which not only preceded the existence of modern social organizations, but in many cases even initiated them. In

5 Maurice Duverger, *Los partidos políticos*. (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2012) 231.

6 Maurice Duverger, *Los partidos políticos*. (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2012) 231.

particular, in our country, at the time when the first modern mass parties were constituted, there were no previously organized masses of peasants and urban workers, or they were extremely few and weak, so that a large part of our unions were created by these parties and followed their guidelines⁷.

This data helps to locate the centrality of the political parties in Venezuela. For better or for worse, they have set the rhythm, the means, and the capacity of organizations in our society. They have been the practical channel traditionally turned to in order to concretize collective and public initiatives.

The centrality of political parties in matters of social organization gained formal importance in 1958. The democracy inaugurated after the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez was marked by authentic ideological pluralism, and the political parties controlled all aspects of the national life⁸. The constitution 1961 included the political and organizational reality of society. For this reason, political parties were placed at the core of the emerging democracy.

There are no statistical records on the valuation of political parties during the first 15 years of democracy. However, the high participation in the electoral processes of 1958, 1963 and 1973 show that confidence was placed in them. John Martz and Enrique Baloyra conducted the first opinion studies in 1973 and

7 Juan Carlos Rey, *Temas de formación sociopolítica: el sistema de partidos venezolano, 1830-1999* (Caracas: Publicaciones UCAB, 2009), 29.

8 Alan Brewer Carías, *Sumario de la Constitución de 1961* (San Cristóbal: Editorial Jurídica Venezolana, 1983), 5.

in 1983⁹. Their results evidence a progressive disillusionment that began with the rejection of politicians and then spread to the parties. When supplementing these data with the results of Latinobarómetro –which started in 1995–, it can be seen that the initial discontent turned into contempt and affected the democratic system¹⁰ in the 1990s.

In Venezuela, the crisis of the parties preceded –and contributed to– the decline of democracy. In the 1990s, the bipartisan dynamics weakened and abstention increased markedly¹¹. Knight summarizes it as follows:

It is a fact that the discrediting of political parties had never been so low since 1958. It is convenient to differentiate the following: the discrediting of the two-party system, as it had predominated since the Puntofijo Pact; and the loss of prestige of the party institution in general, since the confusion between democracy and party system and, even more so, between party system and politics leads to the rejection of democracy and politics¹² (own translation).

9 Juan Carlos Rey collects and analyzes the results of these surveys in: Juan Carlos Rey, *Temas de formación sociopolítica: el sistema de partidos venezolano, 1830-1999* (Caracas: Publicaciones UCAB, 2009), 29.

10 Paola Bautista de Alemán, “Auge y crisis de las democracias pactadas: Venezuela, España y Chile” (Tesis doctoral, Universidad de Rostock, 2019).

11 Miriam Kornblith, *Crisis y transformación del sistema político venezolano: nuevas y viejas reglas del juego*. presented at the XX International Congress of the Association of Latin American Studies. Guadalajara - Mexico, (Editorial Lasa, 1997). Found on January 17, 2018 in <http://biblioteca.clacso.edu.ar/clacso/otros/20130702011124/kornblith.pdf>

12 Manuel Caballero, *La gestación de Hugo Chávez: 40 años de luces y sombras de la democracia venezolana* (Madrid: Editorial Catarata, 2000) 129.

The rejection towards political parties was so severe that electoral organizations that emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s called themselves “movements» rather than “political parties”¹³. However, the change in terminology did not imply a substantial change in its dynamics since its forms still resembled traditional parties¹⁴. They were new organizations that, although formally started from scratch, inherited traits and sympathizers of the previous order.

The Constitution of 1999 also included a critical disposition towards political parties. Article 67, which refers to the right of citizens to associate for political purposes, does not speak of “parties” but rather “associations for political purposes”. This distinction, added to the emphasis on direct democracy (Article 5 of the Constitution), is no less important. The constitutional text echoed prior criticism and proposed a *sui generis* constitutionalization of political parties, granting political parties a mediating function in the process of building popular will¹⁵.

13 In July 1997 Hugo Chávez created the “Movimiento V República”. Three years later, a group of young people founded the “Movimiento Primero Justicia”, the political organization that leads the Venezuelan opposition today.

14 Jesús Ascargota, “Monopolistische Parteien in Lateinamerika. Inkubation, Entwicklung und Persistenz eines Modells. Vergleichende Analyse von Mexiko, Kuba, Nikaragua und Venezuela” (Tesis doctoral, Universidad de Rostock, 2013).

15 Juan Miguel Matheus, *El concepto de disciplina de grupo* (Caracas: Centro de Estudios de Derecho Público de la Universidad Monteávila, Editorial Jurídica Venezolana e Instituto de Estudios Parlamentarios Fermín Toro, 2014), 77.

Three effects of the procedural reduction of democracy

The system that inaugurated the Chavista revolution –in tune with the anti-party atmosphere that prevailed in the country¹⁶– sought to remove the parties from its center and promote other ways for political organization. To achieve this purpose, it seems that the formal change in the constitutional text was insufficient. Eradicating the partisan dynamics that guided our political actions for more than four decades required changes in political culture, and such transformations are not guaranteed by decrees. Two decades have since passed, and the changes that have occurred in this area require rigorous studies. The intention is not to approach the phenomenon in its entirety, but to rather describe the political-electoral dynamics of Chavismo and specify three effects that it caused within the internal dynamics of the parties, especially those that make up the democratic opposition. The effects mentioned below are not unique or exclusive.

Hugo Chávez won his first presidential election in 1998. Between 1998 and 2015, 15 different types of elections were held: presidential, parliamentary and a referendum. The frequent call to elections offered the appearance of democratic legitimacy. The revolution wielded power away from the Constitution¹⁷ while repeatedly calling for elections. Chavismo reduced democracy to its procedural scope and mutilated its institutional dimension¹⁸.

16 I recommend reading Luis Castro Leiva's speech given at the Congress of the Republic on January 23, 1999. In his speech, he managed to synthesize the political environment that I refer to in this article: <https://prodavinci.com/el-discurso-de-luis-castro-leiva-sobre-el-23-de-enero-de-1958/>

17 Juan Miguel Matheus, "The gradual nature of the dismantling of the rule of law in Venezuela" in *Democratización* 1- no 2 (2019): 6-47.

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

The autocratic tendencies of the promoters of the Constitution of 1999 only crippled the text.

The electoral dynamics imposed by the Chavista revolution had immediate effects, contrary to those proposed in terms of political organization. It seems that this mechanism, far from distancing the parties from the center of politics, rooted them there. Certainly, in Venezuela we experience the same phenomenon registered worldwide¹⁹, and party affiliation and/or identification rates are low²⁰. However, the recurring call to elections was able to reinforce the structures of parties and submitted those with the mechanisms to compete on the electoral field to other participation spaces.

The pressure of the described electoral dynamic encouraged the expansion of the national, regional, municipal and parish structures of the main opposition political parties. Members of the so-called G4²¹ created and strengthened an institutional architecture geared towards high electoral performance: development of the electoral roll, execution of campaigns, mobilization on election day, witnesses at all polls, and comprehensive defense of the vote. I must point out that this effort led by the parties, which was accompanied by society, responded to a unitary political strategy aimed at achieving political change

19 Larry Diamond and Richard Gunther, *Political parties and Democracy* (United States of America, The Johns Hopkins University Press and the National Endowment for Democracy, 2001)

20 Héctor Briceño, "Sistema de partidos venezolano: polarización y crisis de representación", in *Desarmado el modelo. Las transformaciones del sistema político venezolano desde 1999*, coord. Diego Urbaneja (Caracas: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2017).

21 The G4 is the unitary instance that includes the four main opposition parties in the country: Acción Democrática, Voluntad Popular, Un Nuevo Tiempo and Primero Justicia.

through the electoral route. The defeat of Chavismo at the ballot box was thought to mean an unequivocal path of democratization for the country²².

In 2015, the results of the organizational efforts described were seen: the opposition electorally defeated the revolution in the parliamentary elections of December 6. The unitary platform obtained 112 deputies and Chavismo, 55²³. This electoral setback provoked two reactions within the dictatorship: 1. A process of systematic harassment against the Parliament that blocked the National Assembly's possibilities for political changes²⁴; and 2. The strengthening of electoral limitations, configuring a non-competitive electoral scenario. Everything seems to indicate that the unitary electoral victory of December 6 only accelerated the autocratic tendencies of the Chavista Revolution.

What has been previously described may indicate that the procedural reduction of democracy that Chavismo implemented

22 On December 6, 2015, after the electoral results were released, the Secretary-General of the Mesa de la Unidad Democrática Jesús Torrealba declared: "Change has begun, Venezuela! Today we have reasons to celebrate. The country asked for change and that change begins today". See: https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2015/12/151204_venezuela_parlamentarias_oposicion_chavismo_dp

23 Certainly, the electoral victory of 2015 was not only due to the organizational capacity of the political parties. The results obtained responded to the confluence of multiple factors. Especially the spontaneous mobilization of citizens who voted for the option of change and defended their will when the process was closed. Even recognizing that there are more variables than those specified in this article, we must highlight the indispensable nature of the work of political parties and their structures as a means of channeling citizen preferences.

24 Carlos García Soto, "The blocking of the legislative function and of the comptroller function of the National Assembly by the Supreme Tribunal of Justice: an introduction", in *Democratization* 2, no 5 (2020): 31-59.

had three effects –not unique or exclusive– on the opposition political parties and their internal dynamics:

1. It rooted the parties at the center of the political game.
2. It stimulated the expansion of its electoral structures and guided the development of partisan-political life in this regard.
3. It encouraged other instances of social and political organization to join –formally or informally– in order to channel citizen participation through electoral political change mechanisms.

Challenges faced by political parties

On March 7, 2018, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, presented his annual report. In the statement, he stated:

I am also deeply alarmed (...) by the erosion of democratic institutions. The fundamental principle of the separation of powers has been severely compromised, since the National Constituent Assembly continues to concentrate unrestricted powers. Two main opposition parties have been disqualified by the Electoral Council, and the official opposition coalition has been invalidated by the Supreme Court²⁵.

Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein added that Venezuela does not meet the “minimum conditions for free and credible elections”, and offered an accurate diagnosis of the electoral conditions in the country.

²⁵ See: <https://news.un.org/es/story/2018/03/1428522>

In recent months, the situation has worsened. Despite internal and external pressure, the dictatorship has shown no signs of easing or opening up. On the contrary, they have intensified their repressive actions and oppressive maneuvers. Currently, the four main opposition parties are outlawed and the revolution is making efforts to build an opposition tailored to their interests²⁶.

The blocking of the electoral option accounts for the installation of a closed autocratic political system and imposes challenges on the entire society, especially on the political parties that have so far led the democratic struggle. In this section, I will list what I consider to be the main challenges that these organizations must face in the scenario described.

Before proceeding, it is worth remembering three premises that I have set out throughout the article. Firstly, political parties are the institutions of political and social mediation with the longest tradition and organizational capacity in the country. Secondly, the procedural reduction of Chávez's democracy was accompanied by an electoral dynamic that relocated the parties to the center of the political contest. And third, the recurring call to election promoted the development and strengthening of the electoral structures of these organizations.

The main challenges faced by the parties in the described scenario are economic, political, and existential.

26 Paola Bautista de Alemán, "Venezuela: electoral political perspectives for a failed and partially collapsed Gangster State", in *Democratization* 1, no 3 (2019): 61-86.

Economic challenge

Venezuela is a country in ruins, which suffers hyperinflation, poverty, hunger, inequality, the collapse of public services, forced migration, among others. I will hereby present some data that illustrates the panorama. The National Assembly Finance Commission periodically calculates inflation rates. It is the only official figure freely available. In April 2020, Parliament reported that the country experiences 102.4% accumulated inflation and 3,276% year-on-year inflation²⁷. In addition to this, the minimum wage is \$4 a month and the food basket for a family of 5 people costs \$255.

The National Survey of Living Conditions (Encovi) published in 2019²⁸ revealed high rates of misery. The study carried out by the Central University of Venezuela, the Simón Bolívar University and the Andrés Bello Catholic University indicated that 87% of Venezuelans live in poverty, 80% suffer from food insecurity and 89% of families cannot buy food. That same year, Caritas de Venezuela warned that severe acute malnutrition had doubled in 14 states of the country²⁹.

Along with poverty, another concern is the structural collapse of public services. The Venezuelan Public Services Observatory conducts research to estimate its performance. In its latest studies, it has found that 16.7% of homes receive running water, 40% of homes suffer from continuous interruptions in electricity service

27 See: <https://angelalvaradorangel.com/2020/01/23/dip-alvarado-inflacion-de-diciembre-2019-se-ubico-en-331-y-la-acumulada-e-interanual-se-encuentra-en-7-374/>

28 See: <https://encovi.ucab.edu.ve/>

29 See: <http://www.accionsolidaria.info/website/caritas-venezuela-desnutricion-aguda-severa-aumento-100-en-14-estados/>

and 63% of citizens do not have internet service at home³⁰. In addition to this, the acute fuel crisis in the country in recent weeks has crystallized and mobility problems are severe. Such destruction explains the migratory wave that has affected the region. According to UNHCR (UN Refugee Agency), refugees and migrants from Venezuela exceed 4 million³¹.

The described economic environment is devastating and impacts every Venezuelan. Most of them do not have a stable job, or social security, or the money to buy food; seldom receive clean water, and there are constant power cuts. Living in Venezuela has become a survival challenge. This reality brutally impacts our daily lives and could encourage entropy. It can limit our social dimension. Surviving is a demanding task that leaves little room for other activities.

In this sense and in the first place, the economic challenge that the parties that oppose the dictatorship must face is profoundly human: *Finding incentives so that Venezuelans are not reduced to our material shortcomings and so they find meaning in political participation.*

Two specific risks may emerge in the described environment. Firstly, misery can be a breeding ground for the economic manipulation of leadership and militancy. “Economic manipulation” is understood as the purchase of consciences with financing from the regime or people close to it. In the last months, Primero Justicia experienced this threat with the so-called “Operation Alacrán”. The dictatorship bought the deputies Luis

30 See: <http://www.observatoriovsp.org/>

31 See: <https://www.acnur.org/noticias/press/2019/6/5cfa5eb64/refugiados-y-migrantes-de-venezuela-superan-los-cuatro-millones-acnur-y.html>

Parra (Yaracuy state) and Conrado Pérez (Trujillo state) and tried to “sting” regional and parish leaders³².

The second risk concerns solidarity structures within political parties. The serious deficiencies of the militancy encourage –almost naturally– the construction of structures of internal solidarity that seek to alleviate and accompany the pain of poverty. These mechanisms are necessary and respond to human principles. However, if they are not implemented rigorously, responsibly, and uprightly, there is a risk of starting a vicious circle that will give rise to patronage and ultimately weaken the organization. The ultimate challenge is to take care of the fine line that separates solidarity from partisan patronage.

Political challenge

Nicolás Maduro’s dictatorship is fierce, and those who militate in political parties are perhaps the central focus of its angry attacks. According to the Organization of American States in Venezuela, there are currently 278 political prisoners³³, among which are the deputies Juan Requesens, Renzo Pietro and Gilber Caro. There are also more than twenty representatives in exile, including Julio Borges, who presided over Parliament in 2017. Deputy Juan Pablo Guanipa, who is Vice President of the Chamber, was stripped of his parliamentary immunity by the Supreme Tribunal of Justice.

32 “Operación Alacrán en 16 frases: montos, nombres y Maduro”. See: <https://talcualdigital.com/la-operacion-alacran-en-16-frases-montos-nombres-y-maduro/>

33 “OEA valida listado de presos políticos en Venezuela: 278”. See: <https://www.radiotelevisionmarti.com/a/presos-pol%C3%ADticos-venezuela-ong-foro-penal-oea/224270.html>

He remains in the country and suffers constant harassment from State security forces.

Persecution is not limited to those who hold positions of popular election or national leadership within political parties. Middle cadres are also intimidated. In recent weeks, the dictatorship has arrested three collaborators of the President Juan Guaidó. Fernando Albán, former councilor of Caracas and National Secretary of Trade Union Justice (Primero Justicia), was murdered on October 8, 2018, in the SEBIN after having suffered serious torture³⁴.

To be dedicated to politics in Venezuela is to submit oneself to serious risks. And such dangers are not limited to those who serve the democratic struggle inside or outside the country (those who work from exile also suffer threats). The harassment extends to their closest families and collaborators. For this reason, the political challenge that the parties that oppose the dictatorship face *refers to its strengthening as societies of free people that may be the refuge where its members find the necessary strength to overcome the fear inspired by the regime and to be constant in the fight for liberation.*

Delving into the terms, “society” is understood as was defined by Jacques Maritain³⁵. It is a truly human, ethical-social reality that is the work of reason and is linked to man’s intellectual and spiritual abilities. The creation of societies responds to the social

34 “El opositor venezolano Fernando Albán fue asesinado, según el informe policial”. See: https://www.abc.es/internacional/abci-opositor-venezolano-fernando-alban-asesinado-segun-informe-policial-201811202109_noticia.html

35 Jacques Maritain, *Lecturas escogidas de Jacques Maritain III: Visión general de su filosofía política y social*, ed. Angel C. Correa (Ediciones Humanismo Integral) Retrieved from: http://www.jacquemaritain.com/pdf/01_LE/03_LE_FilPol.pdf

nature of the human person. And it is a voluntary and free act of those who decide to devote to others in a common space.

It is important to specify two ideas: freedom and will. As was stated previously, the dictatorship outlawed the main opposition political parties. It took away their formal identification –electoral card and legal form– using judicial treachery. These organizations do not exist in the formal construction of the public space that the dictatorship tries to impose. However, reality offers a different perspective. The parties, being true human societies that respond to the exercise of freedom and the will of their members, exist and have the capacity to grow despite the attacks of those who seek to remain in power at all costs.

Regarding the word *strengthen*, in a democracy, the strengthening of organizations for electoral purposes is closely related to the territorial and numerical expansion of militancy. It is associated with its capacity for exposure, proselytizing, and accessing power through the conquest of wills in free and transparent elections. The autocratic context tends to broaden this perspective. It does not mean that the areas described above should be abandoned or neglected, which in fact offer an established work dynamic capable of efficiently meeting a possible call for fairly competitive elections, but that the concept must be rearranged.

The ferocity of the dictatorship forces to reconsider what the strengthening of political organizations consists of. Recalling the years of persecution of the dictatorship, Don Patricio Aylwin wrote:

“Saving the body and the soul of the party” has become our task. As expressed in the text, “saving the soul” required us to “maintain our moral dignity, be consistent with our principles, affirm our truth, defend human rights, be in solidarity with the suffering”. And “saving the body” required “being prudent and cunning, not exposing ourselves to the wrath of the powerful, acting with care and managing to maintain an organization appropriate to the circumstances”³⁶ (own translation).

Don Patricio’s testimony offers a strengthening itinerary for political parties that resist dictatorships. The situation is as difficult as the challenge it poses: What does it mean to “save the party’s body and soul”? In order to try to answer this question, these intellectual references will be complemented with my political experience. I am a member of the National Board of Directors of Primero Justicia and I chair the Juan Germán Roscio Foundation, the party’s training body. For years I have toured the country and shared with our militancy. In Primero Justicia, we have set out to find a practical channel for Don Patricio’s route and, in the next paragraphs, I will recount our efforts.

Firstly, we identify a fundamental premise as a starting point: the salvation of the party’s body and soul is a joint task. The soul without the body is horrifying and the body without the soul is dead. For this reason, our initial task was to coordinate efforts between the national training body and the National Organizing Secretariat. Today, both teams work side by side promoting the expansion of our structures and strengthening what unites us. In reality, this takes the form of political activities for educational

36 Patricio Aylwin Azocar, *El reencuentro de los demócratas: del golpe al triunfo del No* (Santiago de Chile: Ediciones B Chile S.A, 1998), 11.

and organizational purposes that encourage those present to continue despite the obstacles that reality imposes on us.

The content we offer and the organization mechanisms we use are tied to our reality. Each Venezuelan carries with them a personal tragedy associated with a complex humanitarian crisis. Our militancy –and the entire country– suffer from hunger, exhaustion, physical fatigue, insomnia, depression, among others. We have found that pain and uncertainty can lead us to question the meaning of our efforts. Without a doubt, confronting extreme situations raises fundamental questions: Why do we live in this situation? What is the country asking from me at the moment? The demands for training and political organization in Venezuela are conditioned by the environment we live in. The militancy needs supplies to understand and face the injustices it suffers, tools to manage its emotions, and mechanisms to raise its voice without exposing itself to unnecessary risks.

“Saving body and soul” has brought us closer to the transcendent meaning of politics. We have given ourselves the task of creating pedagogies that allow us to make accessible philosophical and metaphysical concepts. We emphasize how politics is the highest form of charity, as well as the importance of cultivating human virtues. We have transformed training and organization sessions into human encounters where we strive to cultivate the ideas that unite us. Our goal is that each militant is recognized as unique and irreplaceable. Our sessions are an opportunity to thank them for their dedication and to remind them that they are part of a project that calls them personally.

The party as a society of free people that serves as a refuge for its members also feeds on the testimony of its members. Every time

a leader embodies our ideas, it encourages our moral. Generally, “testimonies” are accompanied by pain: physical disappearance, torture, persecution, kidnapping, exile. Our moral grows with testimonies and accompaniment. No party member should feel alone in the fight and will always be able to go to their bosom to find hope and strength. In this way, the party becomes a refuge for its members.

Existential challenge

The installation of the dictatorship imposes challenges of different orders. While the previous sections were dedicated to economic and political, this will delve into existential challenges. I have named it that way because it refers to the radical nature of the personal and institutional struggle that the current situation in Venezuela demands.

The challenge of an existential order has two dimensions: one personal and the other institutional. In the case of the former, the political vocation is very personal. The decision to devote oneself to the public must be free and individual. In a democracy, this call is developed in political parties. This imposes challenges associated with partisan life: building leadership, growing in the internal structure, contributing to the organization’s political project. All this in order to be a candidate for a position of popular election, win elections, and reach positions of power. In this way, the fullness of the political vocation may be associated with a specific office and/or with a specific electoral victory. It can be risky because from this perspective the end of democracy can mean the end of politics.

History shows us that this is not the case. Politicians who have faced and defeated ferocious dictatorships have managed to develop their political vocation in hostile environments. Felipe González , leader of the Spanish Socialist Workers Party and precursor of democracy in Spain, was born in 1942. He came to the world when Franco was installed in power. He found channels to develop his political vocation in a proscribed and persecuted political organization. He stood firm and when the doors of transition opened, he found himself at the forefront of democratic forces. He promptly became President of the Government and served there for 14 years. We have closer examples: Rómulo Gallegos, the first democratically elected President in Venezuela. He was born in 1884, in a fragmented and caudillist country. In his own words: barbaric and wild. Adversity was never an obstacle to the development of his political vocation or his literary talents.

Difficulties force us to reflect on the meaning of the political vocation in today's Venezuela. The death of democracy does not mean the death of politics and requires opening horizons. In a dictatorship, the fullness of the political vocation is deeply human and associated with a personal and collective contribution to the cause of freedom. Once the electoral option has disappeared, "we have a free conscience and can work for the country seeking democracy as a single reward", as Deputy Juan Pablo Guanipa stated in a press conference on January 15, 2020.

In the *institutional level*, what does the country currently demand of political parties? Dictatorships ban political parties. They seek to eliminate their adversaries and dominate our modes of articulation. However, as we specified in previous sections, there is a reality superior to its ambitions: *the social dimension and the vocation to the common good*.

In history, we find that the illegalization of parties is followed –almost naturally– by the rise of political movements. The movements are free spaces for political and social organization that seek democratic liberation. Its main asset is *its moral authority, its moral reserve*. “Solidarity” (Poland) was led by Lech Walesa and “Charter 77” (Czechoslovakia) by Vaclav Havel. The first was a union leader; the second was a writer. Both testified of spiritual strength and knew how to guide their people to freedom.

Final considerations

From its beginnings, Chavismo set out to promote new modes of organization that would displace the parties from the center of the political conflict in the country. He used an anti-party discourse and when he came to power he promoted constitutional changes oriented in that direction. However, the procedural reduction of democracy had opposite effects: (i) Reaffirmed the parties at the center of the political contest, (ii) Stimulated the expansion of their electoral structures and (iii) Encouraged the other instances of political organization to approach them in order to channel the wishes of citizen participation.

Currently, the electoral path is blocked. This reality requires political parties to rethink themselves and find ways of liberation that allow Venezuelans to earn back their vote. Certainly, the robbing of the right to choose deprives the parties of formal and practical areas that constituted them. Strictly speaking, they ceased to be so because they cannot run for elections (remember the initial concept of Giovanni Sartori referred to in the article). However, history shows that autocratic obstacles can offer the opposition leadership an opportunity to resist and cultivate an almost invincible power: the moral reserve. This *moral power* is

a quarry for political action that can open doors to liberation and offer pre-democratic conditions in an eventual democratic inauguration.

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