

The quarter century of the Venezuelan opposition: advances and setbacks

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From a political perspective, Venezuela's recent history has unfolded amidst a confrontation between two clearly differentiated political forces that have been engaged in an intense struggle for a quarter of a century. From the opposition's standpoint, we could be facing one of the most intense periods of political struggle in recent times, comparable in some measure to the experiences of the most representative dictatorships of the 20th century.

The path has not always been a straight line. Over the course of 25 years, the opposition has gone through various winding stages, with advances and setbacks that should provide lessons for future generations. Venezuela's history should be carefully analyzed by coming generations, starting from the early years, when partisan activities took place in an atmosphere of essential freedom, both in street demonstrations and in occupying parliamentary seats, as well as in regional and local governance within various state institutions, to more recent times when opposition party members have been persecuted, imprisoned, and tortured.

In this article, we will attempt to provide an overview of the organization process within the Venezuelan opposition over

nearly 25 years. We will highlight the most significant aspects of each stage to gain a comprehensive understanding of their performance over time. It is important to note that this paper does not aspire to be a comprehensive document reflecting the many factors that have influenced the recent stages of Venezuelan political history. Instead, it represents a first step towards understanding an intense period of advances and setbacks in which all of us, in one way or another, are involved.

1998-2002: Learning to be opposition during the Chavista regime

The beginnings of the opposition were tough, and the path to constituting a majority of around 80% of Venezuelans today, according to most polls in recent years, was long and full of challenges. In the early years following Hugo Chávez's electoral victory, the Venezuelan opposition faced the challenge of reconfiguring itself in the face of overwhelming Chavista triumph. In this context, the old organization of traditional political parties had ended, and a new type of leadership was necessary.

This change could be carried out with a certain degree of freedom, thanks partly to the significant advantage the government had built within society. Throughout the process, the rejection of the opposition bloc and constant disqualifying epithets were part of the official discourse, leading some experts to consider the Chavista administration as a model that tended towards competitive authoritarianism¹. As time passed, the revolutionary model took on its socialist and revolutionary vocation, causing the

1 Steven Levitsky, and Lucan A. Way, "Elecciones sin democracia: el surgimiento del autoritarismo competitivo", in: *Estudios Políticos*, N° 24, 2004, pp. 159-176, obtained from: <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=5263670>, (Consulted April 24, 2023).

opposition to become the counter-revolutionary and anti-system side, a role it has maintained in the eyes of Chavismo until recent times.

Initially, the “democracy” built in the early stages of Chavismo assumed the overwhelming role of the majority in decision-making, disregarding and underestimating the participation of minority groups. This is why the opposition was considered “escuálida”², for their small numbers, and hence their actions seemed senseless and unreasonable in this model. This process ran parallel to the Constituent National Assembly’s development and the state’s reforms in the early years of Chavista government. In this way, society lost spaces for participation while central power grew stronger. Thus, the opposition’s slogans were summarized in the expression “Chávez, go away now!”, especially with the political intention of seeking to regain the gradually lost spaces.

For the Venezuelan opposition, the reform process by Hugo Chávez was seen as the downfall of a model that had demonstrated its successes in the past and, at the same time, seemed to have an expiration date. This refers to the imposition of new leadership, the government’s intervention in the state-owned company *Petróleos de Venezuela* (PDVSA), the rejection by business and labor organizations such as *Fedecámaras* and the Confederation of Venezuelan Workers (CTV), and the reaction of those opposition sectors that saw power slipping away from their hands. All of this produced a tense period characterized by confrontations in various spheres.

2 This derogatory term was frequently used by Chavista officials to refer to the “weak” or “scrawny” nature of the opposition.

Since 2001, the situation became more tense. The enactment of the Enabling Law was considered as a first step towards socialism, at least by a part of society, which was compounded by the economic conditions in Venezuela that showed no signs of improvement in the years following the first Chavista victory. Along with this, the publication of Decree 1011 in October 2000 and the agenda for supervising educational institutions led society to take to the streets in what could be considered the first round of protests against the regime³, while in the elections of December that year, it was evident that one-third of the Venezuelan population identified themselves as part of the opposition.

By 2002, the opposition was clearly differentiated by sectors: the Church, the Confederation of Venezuelan Workers (CTV), Fedecámaras, and various civil society organizations. This meant that the opposition was able to mobilize a significant support base that allowed for massive street protests in different cities across the country, which went hand in hand with a decline in Hugo Chávez's popularity. In this context, the groundwork was laid for the opposition to consider the removal of the president from power through a coup that involved a series of coordinated protests with a strike in the oil industry.

The economic measures implemented by Chavismo, the mass layoffs of oil workers by Hugo Chávez with the sound of a whistle on national television⁴ and the events of April 2002 (Chávez's resignation on the 11th and his return to power on the

3 Pino Iturrieta, Elías (coord.), *Historia mínima de Venezuela*, El Colegio de México AC, México, 2018, p. 217.

4 Eddie A. Ramírez S., "7 de abril, despedidos con un pito", *Runrunes*, April 7, 2023, obtained from: <https://runrun.es/opinion/499036/despeditos-con-un-pito-eddie-a-ramirez-s/> (Consulted April 22, 2023).

13th⁵), which are still confusing for the community after more than 20 years, marked an unclear period, especially due to what can be considered the opposition leaders' inexperience at the time and the implementation of particularly conservative measures for the conditions of Venezuelan society at that time.

2002 to 2013: Opposition reinvention

After the opposition had taken power on April 11th, Venezuela's history changed in less than 48 hours. On the one hand, the Chavista discourse became more inflammatory: in addition to being *escuálidos*, the opposition was labeled as *coup-plotters*, *fascists*, *unpatriotic*, *pitiyanquis*⁶, and so on, while the governing party portrayed Hugo Chávez as the interpreter of Bolívar's homeland

For the opposition, keeping the support base of 30% of the Venezuelan population was necessary. This was attempted to be strengthened by creating an alliance bloc called the *Coordinadora Democrática*. Concerning the past, the opposition aimed to materialize the idea of presenting themselves with a unified voice that would counterbalance the Chavista leadership, which had been re-legitimized among its followers after the opposition's attempted coup. In its founding document titled "Democratic Pact for Unity and National Reconstruction", the protagonists claim to represent "the sentiments of the vast majority of Venezuelans,

5 Further reading on this can be done in: Leonardo V. Vera, "Venezuela 1999-2007", *Nueva Sociedad*, N° 215, May-June 2008, obtained from: <https://www.nuso.org/articulo/venezuela-1999-2007/> (Consulted April 27, 2023).

6 A term used to refer to those perceived as pro-American.

reflected in all opinion polls and demonstrated through the massive participation of the population in protests and demonstrations”⁷.

In this sense, the organization’s purpose was inspired by the idea that it was necessary to recover Venezuela’s economic and social conditions before Hugo Chávez came to power. The proposal was based on the need to alleviate the intense political polarization present in Venezuelan society and reposition the nation’s serious economic and social problems at the center of the national agenda. According to the opposition, these problems had not been addressed by Chavismo, despite having several years in government.

At the end of 2002, parallel to the process of establishing a negotiation and agreement table composed of the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Carter Center⁸, the opposition began advocating for the development of a recall referendum, as established in the national constitution, particularly in articles 72 and 233⁹. After months of tension between the National Electoral Council (CNE) and *Coordinadora Democrática* regarding

7 *Coordinadora Democrática de Venezuela*, Pacto Democrático por la Unidad y Reconstrucción Nacional, October 17, 2022, obtained from: https://web.archive.org/web/20070205135301/http://www.acuerdosocial.com/download/cdt_17.pdf (Consulted April 22, 2023).

8 Miguel Ángel Martínez Meucci, “La Mesa de Negociación y Acuerdos (2002-2003) y el proceso de facilitación de la OEA y el Centro Carter” *Politeia* 33, no. 44 (2010): 47-88, Redalyc, obtained from: <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=170020031003> (Consulted April 22, 2023).

9 In summary, Article 72 of the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela establishes, among other things, that “All elected positions and magistracies are revocable”. On the other hand, Article 233 outlines the criteria for absolute vacancies and the procedure for a new presidential election. *Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela*, Official Gazette Extraordinary No. 36,860, December 30, 1999.

the validity of the collected signatures, during which events like *El Firmazo* and *El Reafirmazo*¹⁰ took place, along with a series of protests that saw persecutions and imprisonments, as well as a witch hunt against the referendum signatories under the verification efforts led by Deputy Luis Tascón and his *Lista*¹¹, on August 15, 2004, the consultation was carried to decide whether a recall referendum would be held¹².

The opposition's defeat resulted in internal division leading up to the subsequent regional elections held on October 31 of that same year. While one part of the former unified opposition decided to assume the stance of abstention due to the questionable performance of the National Electoral Council (CNE) in previous electoral events, the other sector chose to participate in the contest despite the obstacles. Unlike the recall referendum, neither the OAS nor the Carter Center would participate as international observers in these elections, undermining the event and tarnishing the perceived legitimacy of the CNE. On election day, around 14 million Venezuelans participated in the election of regional authorities, with a turnout of 54.27% abstention, the

10 For more information: Juan Jesús Aznárez, "La oposición canta victoria en el «firmazo» contra Chávez", *El País*, December 2, 2003, obtained from: https://elpais.com/diario/2003/12/03/internacional/1070406013_850215.html (Consulted April 22, 2023). Carlos García Soto, "Algunas lecciones para no olvidar del referendo revocatorio de 2004", *Runrunes*, June 29, 2016, obtained from: <https://runrun.es/nacional/268572/algunas-lecciones-para-no-olvidar-del-referendo-revocatorio-de-2004-por-carlos-garcia-soto/> (Consulted April 22, 2023).

11 "¿Cómo surgió la lista Tascón y cuáles fueron sus efectos?", *El Pitazo*, February 24, 2022, obtained from: <https://elpitazo.net/politica/como-surgio-la-lista-tascon-y-cuales-fueron-sus-efectos/amp/> (Consulted April 24, 2023).

12 "Referendum presidencial 2004", CNE, September 3rd, 2004, obtained from: http://www.cne.gob.ve/referendum_presidencial2004/, (Consulted April 24, 2023).

highest in democratic history. In the final balance, Chavismo emerged strengthened. With the victory of the “No” in the recall referendum, Polo Patriótico obtained a total of 20 governorships (90%), 270 mayoral offices (83%), and the Mayor’s Office of Caracas. On the other hand, divisions within the Venezuelan opposition led to a significant blow in these elections, from which they could only recover in the subsequent regional elections. They lost six out of the eight governorships they had won in 2000, as well as almost all the mayoralties¹³.

In 2004, the *Coordinadora Democrática* was dissolved¹⁴. The opposition abstained from participating in the 2005 parliamentary elections, but with very adverse consequences: instead of delegitimizing the process, the ruling party occupied almost all the seats. The majority applauded Chávez for staying on this path: the opposition was a minority in the state institutions and on the streets, which led to the advancement of the constituent process and the drafting of a new Constitution. By 2006, the presidential elections in which the opposition presented Manuel Rosales as their candidate confirmed that 30% of Venezuelans opposed the ruling party.

In 2007, the electoral trend favorable to Chavismo seemed to reverse. The closure of RCTV, one of the main references of the Venezuelan opposition movement, led society to take to the streets again in various cities across the country. What was supposed to be a straightforward procedure, supported by the argument for the expiration of the concession to broadcast on the national spectrum, spiraled rapidly after the widespread rejection by the

13 “Elecciones Regionales Octubre 2004”, CNE, obtained from: <http://www.cne.gob.ve/regionales2004/>, (Consulted April 23, 2023).

14 Margarita López Maya, *Del Viernes Negro al Referendo Revocatorio* (Caracas: Editorial Alfa, 2016), p. 284.

public. In this scenario, a new political leadership emerges, led by university students from the main opposition organizations. These young people injected freshness into the political movement and managed to reinforce the popular support base as they were not the protagonists of the April 2002 coup nor the authors of the subsequent electoral setbacks.

Additionally, the declaration of a socialist state by President Hugo Chávez was not viewed favorably by all of the ruling party. Therefore, in the context of the referendum on the constitutional reform, which aimed to advance the model promoted by President Chávez, he faced his first electoral defeat since 1998. From that moment, the opposition kept a favorable trend. In 2008, this trend materialized by restructuring the opposition's alliance by creating *la Mesa de la Unidad Democrática* (MUD), the new counterweight to the government forces. Over the next ten years, the MUD became the main reference point for the Venezuelan opposition, defined by the National Unity Agreement, the first phase of the opposition forces' negotiation project, in effect between 2008 and 2009. Its objectives reaffirm the fight for democracy and the overcoming of the national economic crisis while defending liberties and respect for institutionalism¹⁵.

After years of Venezuela experiencing the most significant oil boom in its history, the global economy showed signs of exhaustion, and the previous boom seemed to be a thing of the past. Moreover, Hugo Chávez's illness, kept as a state secret, as well as the inherent problems of Bolivarian socialism, such as

15 "Propuesta de un Acuerdo de Unidad Nacional «La Alternativa para el Cambio», firmado por las organizaciones políticas de oposición el 23 de enero de 2008", *Globovisión*, January 27, 2008, obtained from: <https://web.archive.org/web/20080127122415/http://www.globovision.com/news.php?nid=76943> (Consulted April 24, 2023).

increasingly evident scarcity, corruption, and a surge in inflation, among others, contributed to narrowing the gap between the opposition and the government to just 10 points in the 2012 electoral contest between Henrique Capriles Radonski, the opposition candidate, and the severely ill Hugo Chávez. By this time, the collapse of the ruling party was more than evident.

2013-2023: civil rebellions and the challenges of overcoming disillusionment

Little could steroids and palliative treatments do to keep Hugo Chávez alive. After the well-known broadcast on December 8, 2012, in which he proposed Nicolás Maduro as his successor, he was never seen alive again. The socialist project would then have a new leader, or at least that was the expectation. Nicolás Maduro's administration has demonstrated the diversity of strategies that chavismo has employed over the years to stay in power, especially when the economic and social crisis limited their ability to distribute various social aids that had characterized Hugo Chávez's administration.

In the following years, Venezuelan society experienced what can be considered one of the most complex stages in its republican history. From a political standpoint, legitimizing Nicolás Maduro involved holding new presidential elections in April 2013, in which Capriles Radonski was once again the opposition candidate. The electoral results showed a narrow margin between the two candidates, with only a 1.5% difference, equivalent to just 220,000 votes, making it the closest margin in a presidential election.

From this moment on, Maduro, el *presidente obrero*¹⁶, had the task of governing a Venezuela in which the opposition was technically no longer a minority group in society, nor *escuálida*, as the Chavistas had referred in the past. It was a context defined by one of the most dramatic economic crises in recorded history. These circumstances, along with the peculiarities of a new Chavista leadership without Chávez, led the opposition to actively engage in a project to remove Nicolás Maduro from power.

The following three attempts to achieve political transition occurred in 2014, 2017, and 2019. The first was labeled *La Salida* (The Exit): a series of protests and mobilizations by various sectors of society that aimed to challenge the growing crisis and the “precarious” leadership of the newly elected President Nicolás Maduro in 2014. Amidst the murders of protesters, including university students, the government managed to resist. The lack of planning, the setting of unattainable objectives for the opposition at that time, and the failure to reach agreements among different societal sectors led to the population’s demobilization.

In the following months, with the community’s support, the opposition took to the streets again and designed diverse strategies to incorporate pro-government sectors into state institutions, including the Armed Forces and security forces. Amid this process, the parliamentary elections of 2015 took place, which was one of the most important moments for the opposition as it meant the conquest of the majority of seats in the National Assembly. The Venezuelan-style gerrymandering designed by the government did not prevent the opposition from winning 112 seats, while the ruling party only obtained 55. In the subsequent

16 The expression “presidente obrero”, or worker-president is used by the media to refer to Nicolás Maduro, alluding to his previous work experience as a bus driver in his younger years.

months, the government pursued various strategies to forcibly regain control of the parliamentary body or at least nullify it, contradicting the popular will expressed in the electoral polls.

Throughout this period, the anti-Chavismo bloc legitimized itself as a democratic alternative in contrast to a government that, over time, displayed an increasingly authoritarian face (control and closure of non-aligned media outlets, persecution of opposition politicians, systematic imprisonments, torture, among others). At the same time, the government devised various mechanisms to hinder opposition participation in the electoral polls of 2017, 2018, and 2020 through disqualifications and dissolution of opposition parties.

The attempt to nullify the opposition-controlled National Assembly reached a breaking point in March 2017 when the government, through the Supreme Court of Justice and the enactment of judgments 155 and 156, sought to strip the Venezuelan parliamentary body of its powers. This led to a new cycle of protests that lasted several months in various cities across the country, particularly in Caracas, where the government displayed a notably repressive face, not only through arrests but also by killing protesters and restricting access to information. The government's call for a National Constituent Assembly and the opposition's agenda against this process, characterized by the National Consultation in July 2017, were part of the political initiatives of both Venezuelan political sides. Despite the efforts made by opposition leaders, especially in their attempt to halt the convening of a new constitution, for the second time in three years, a civil rebellion failed in the country. Outside of political activism, the public felt the absence of an achievable program from the opposition, which consistently claimed that political transition was possible, which was unfeasible, among other reasons, due to

the government's firm control over the Armed Forces and security forces.

In the following months, the opposition appeared to be divided between a majority who clearly opposed Maduro, and a sector willing to cooperate with the government. Moreover, the government, strengthened after the demobilization of the public in 2017, promptly called for presidential elections in 2018, which were considered fraudulent. Nicolás Maduro claimed victory with 68% of the votes, but the opposition candidates did not have the support of the Venezuelan people. However, despite some specific achievements for the opposition, such as the resumption of dialogue with the government on various issues and the release of some political prisoners, once again, the ultimate goal of negotiating the departure of Nicolás Maduro and initiating a transition in Venezuela was not achieved.

By the year 2019, after protests and street closures, student killings, persecutions of political leaders, ad hoc presidencies, 8 pm *cacerolazos*¹⁷, countless tear gas and rubber bullets, the incineration of humanitarian aid, and the hope for a change that never materialized, it was evident that Venezuelan society had reached a significant level of exhaustion and fatigue. This was especially true after fully engaging in pursuing a political objective without the expected results and without leadership capable of successfully guiding them.

As a result, the leadership of the majority in the country had reached a point of stagnation, causing a decrease in support as indicated by polls, while Maduro and other representatives

¹⁷ A *cacerolazo* is a form of protest or demonstration in which people make noise by banging pots, pans, and other utensils together. It is often used as a symbol of dissent and dissatisfaction with the government.

of the ruling party appeared to gain strength. Additionally, the pandemic, to some extent, also contributed to the country's demobilization. So, after the tumultuous 2019, the systematic quarantine imposed on Venezuelans in 2020, coupled with the gas crisis and other factors, the government gained strength and ensured its continuity. This would explain, among other things, why the Chavismo promptly decided to hold parliamentary elections in December of that year, in which there was no doubt that they would secure the majority in the National Assembly, especially when the opposition decided not to participate amid criticism from the international community and allegations of fraud¹⁸.

Currently, following the changes in the economic landscape that have created a temporary sense of stability and a slow recovery in some sectors, although recent data suggests a new cycle of recession¹⁹, and with upcoming presidential elections, which should first involve primary elections for opposition candidates, the Venezuelan opposition faces the challenge of overcoming the characteristic disillusionment of recent months and reinventing itself as what it has always been: the opportunity to rebuild Venezuelan democracy after decades of a systematic shift towards authoritarianism.

18 Deisy Buitrago, and Sarah Kinosian, "Venezuela celebra elecciones parlamentarias en medio de críticas de fraude", *Reuters*, December 6, 2020, obtained from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/venezuela-elecciones-idESKBN28G0EZ>, (Consulted April 27, 2023).

19 For more information: "Condiciones de vida de los venezolanos", *ENCOVI* 2022, November 2022, obtained from: <https://www.proyectoencovi.com/encovi-2022>, (Consulted April 27, 2023). "Alertan sobre nuevo ciclo recesivo en economía venezolana tras caída de 8,3% en primer trimestre de 2023", *Runrunes*, April 26, 2023, obtained from <https://runrun.es/noticias/500166/alertan-sobre-nuevo-ciclo-recesivo-en-economia-venezolana-tras-caida-de-83-en-primer-trimestre-de-2023/>, (Consulted April 27, 2023).

The journey has not been easy, but after 25 years, no one can question the combative and determined attitude of the opposition, especially in the face of adverse circumstances marked by everything but a gentlemen's agreement with the government. The important thing has always been to never lose sight of the ultimate goal: democracy cannot be just a part of history, but a possible and enduring present, no matter the time and effort it requires. May this 25th anniversary serve as a starting point for a new chapter in which the lessons of the past allow us to build the future we aspire to and deserve as a society.