Power Structure and Political Change in Authoritarian Regimes: On What Foundations Should a Strategy for Venezuela Be Built?

Jorge Lazo Cividanes

> *Domination is in a fact a general structure of power.*
> Michel Foucault

When seeking to generate political change, the objective is to alter a prior balance of power, which is always transient. This involves eroding the foundations of the power structure that sustains it. In exploring effective strategies and opportunities for change in authoritarian regimes such as Venezuela, the factors and dynamics that influence their stability must be considered. This text aims to foster a discussion on these topics as part of the effort to guide the country toward a democratic transition.

To begin, it is important to highlight a common mistake that hampers the analysis of political change: the confusion between the concepts of regime and government. We then examine how power is dynamically established in various spaces through the

interaction between social structures and the actions of individuals and groups. Based on this, we reflect on ways to modify the balance of power in authoritarian regimes. Finally, we analyze how the interaction between legitimacy, authority, coercion, and obedience can create dynamics that lead to the fracture of such regimes, an essential condition for change.

Regime, Not Government

When we speak of a political regime, we refer to the set of institutions, norms, and values that regulate and structure the exercise of power within a society. This includes how decisions are made, public policies are implemented, and conflicts between various political actors are resolved. There are numerous criteria for classifying regimes: how power is distributed and exercised, the institutions and practices that regulate access to and use of power, the type of elections, and the level of citizen participation, among others. Similarly, both democracies and authoritarian regimes are divided into distinct subtypes, each with its own particularities that do not determine but do influence the continuity and change of the regime.[1] On the other hand, a government is composed of individuals who hold temporary roles in the administration of the state, lead institutions within the executive branch, and are responsible for designing and implementing public policies. From a methodological standpoint, these are units of analysis that are

---

1   A typification of Nicolás Maduro's regime and its implications for a democratic transition can be found at: Jorge Lazo Cividanes, *Venezuela: repensar la estrategia para hacer la transición posible. Estrategia y poder,* 29 octubre 2017. https://jorgelazocividanes.wordpress.com/2017/11/29/venezuela-estrategia-para-hacer-la-transicion-posible/

closely related but not equivalent. Consequently, government and political regime represent distinct entities.[2]

In addition to highlighting that treating both terms as equivalents is unsuitable, the significance of this distinction lies in the fact that the concept of government is insufficient for thoroughly analyzing the processes of change and continuity in authoritarian regimes as it excludes elements and dynamics that transcend its conceptual boundaries and are essential for understanding the transition from one political regime to another. Moreover, pointing out this error is useful for countering both terms' interchangeable and manipulative use for concealed political purposes. A change of government within an authoritarian regime does not, of course, signify a transition to democracy. Consequently, the constant use of "government change" instead of "regime change" could lead to the erroneous assumption that the latter can be achieved through the traditional electoral competition methods inherent to democracy, which is both false and contradictory.

Structuring and Deconstructing Power

Power is not located in a specific physical place, nor is it a material substance that can be "owned." Instead, it manifests through the interaction between individual or group actions (agency) and the overall institutional configuration (structure). In this interaction, practices and social structures mutually influence

---

2   Scott Mainwaring; Guillermo O'Donnell; and J. Samuel Valenzuela, eds., *Issues in Democratic Consolidation: The New South American Democracies in Comparative Perspective.* University of Notre Dame Press, 1992. Gerardo Munck, "Disaggregating Political Regime. Conceptual Issues in the Study of Democratization". *Working Paper* N° 228, Kellogg Institute, University of Notre Dame, 1996..

one another. In other words, practices shape and are simultaneously shaped by social structures.[3] Through processes characterized by cooperation, competition, and confrontation, power is "structured" and "deconstructed," altering the configuration and distribution of roles, capacities, and resources. The resulting power structure rewards, incentivizes, restricts, and penalizes various practices, setting boundaries on what is possible, acceptable, or desirable. This involves three fundamental processes: 1- interpreting (assigning meanings), 2- legitimizing (establishing norms), and 3- controlling (monitoring and safeguarding individuals and resources), all of which translate into domination. The specific forms of power structures vary significantly between democratic and authoritarian regimes (and even among different authoritarian regimes). Therefore, conducting a detailed and precise analysis of each case is essential to defining strategies to alter the political balance in various regimes.

---

3   The relationship between agency and structure has been widely explored in academic literature. To delve deeper into the ideas presented in this section, from a power-focused perspective, the following sources can be consulted: Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984. Mark Haugaard, "The faces of power, resistance and justification in a changing world", *Journal of Political Power*, 13:1, pp. 1-5, 2020. Mark Haugaard, "The four dimensions of power: conflict and democracy". *Journal of Political Power.* 14:1, pp.153-175, 2021; Steven Lukes, "Power and Agency". *The British Journal of Sociology.* 53: pp. 491-496, 2002. Michel Foucault, "El sujeto y el poder" *Revista Mexicana de Sociología,* Vol. 50, N° 3, pp. 3-20, 1988. For a critical analysis of power relations: Clarissa Rile Hayward, *De-facing power.* Cambridge University Press, 2000. And about the notion of "habitus" and its relationship with the social structure: Pierre Bourdieu, Loïc J. D. Wacquant. *An Invitation of Reflexive Sociology.* Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992

Power can also be represented in "geometric" terms.[4] That is, as a set of social boundaries that delineate the fields or spaces of possible action. Some are open or accessible, while others are closed or restricted, always depending on the type of regime. For instance, media outlets are typically open spaces in democratic regimes but closed –to varying degrees– in authoritarian regimes. The transition from the former to the latter can be achieved through the creation of alternative spaces, which arise from timely and pertinent actions such as demonstrations, protests, or civil disobedience, among others.[5] These actions become entry points. By thoroughly examining the conditions present in the different spaces, it is possible to identify windows of opportunity to intervene and catalyze transformations. Posing some questions can help facilitate this task. For example, how and who systematically blocks change? Who are the critical or indispensable actors? Which actors are important but not decisive? What are their motivations and interests? How can they be mobilized for political change? What discourses, perceptions, and beliefs underlie the norms and practices that sustain the power structure associated with the

---

4 The "geometry of power" can be understood as a metaphor that describes the distribution, exercise, and representation of power within a social or political structure. It provides a way to visualize and analyze power relations in spatial terms. For further exploration of the spatial description of power relations, see: John Gaventa, "Finding the Spaces for Change: A Power Analysis". *IDS Bulletin* 37.5: pp. 23–33, 2006, and John Gaventa, "Linking the prepositions: using power analysis to inform strategies for social action", *Journal of Political Power*, 14:1, pp. 109-130, 2021..

5 It must always be remembered that the effectiveness of instruments depends on the existing social and political conditions at a given time and place. Under different conditions, the same instrument can yield different results.

regime? What degree of acceptance and legitimacy do they have? What strategy could we follow to subvert it?

In summary, power relations operate and prevail behind the institutional façade, manifesting in various forms (visible, invisible, or hidden) and flowing through different spaces (closed, open, alternative) and levels (local, national, global). All power seeks legitimacy and moves dynamically between obedience, disobedience, and punishment. In other words, dominating and being obeyed depends on the capacity to persuade (shaping representations, beliefs, perceptions, identities, etc.) and to repress (monitoring, controlling, and inhibiting actions). From a political perspective, both persuasion and repression are communicative acts. Therefore, the political battleground lies at the intersection and convergence of forms and spaces, with an awareness of the sources of power.[6] This is where political efforts must focus on to alter the existing balance of power and, ultimately, enabling the transition to a democratic regime.

Power Relations and Political Change Processes

In most authoritarian regimes, including Venezuela, there is a formal reproduction of the institutional infrastructure typical of democratic systems. Depending on the type of authoritarian regime in question, this may involve a fictitious division of

---

6   Four main sources are typically identified: political, military, ideological, and economic power. However, a deeper analysis of each –beyond the scope of this text– allows us to assert that, ultimately, economic power depends on political power, which, in turn, relies on "military" power (or coercive capacity) and ideological power. For a detailed discussion, see: Michael Mann, Mark Haugaard, "Reflections on the sources of power". *Journal of Political Power*, 4(2), pp. 169–178, 2011.

power and minimal or nonexistent electoral competition, often characterized by various forms of fraud. The existence of pseudo-democratic spaces does not, of course, translate into effective citizen participation or political pluralism. Although opposition may be institutionally tolerated, authoritarian regimes employ a variety of tools to weaken or neutralize it: disqualifying leaders, fostering divisions, co-opting certain sectors, among others. By leveraging these instruments, electoral processes often become opportunities to legitimize authoritarian institutions and reduce the levels of repression that would otherwise be necessary.

For all these reasons, electoral processes associated with government changes between ruling parties and opposition in democratic regimes are far from being reliable mechanisms for achieving democratic transitions in authoritarian systems. In some contexts, and depending on additional factors, electoral processes may, at best, represent a window of opportunity to destabilize the power structure.

Authoritarian regimes, in summary, engage in battles across all political arenas. While their repressive nature defines them, they often resort to the fraudulent use of various democratic forms and procedures, narrative construction, and ideological work to legitimize themselves. In contrast, democratization movements are not only constrained by a lack of power resources and restricted access to spaces but also often avoid or forgo the complex and dangerous work required to penetrate and conquer these spaces. By failing to develop the necessary means to achieve their objectives, such movements end up relying on "black swans"or external actors. Instances where pro-democracy external actors are willing to exert sufficient pressure or overthrow authoritarian regimes by force are historically rare. Generally speaking, military

interventions to foster regime change and facilitate transitions to democracy are costly and uncertain ventures for any state, even if initial success is achieved.

From the opposition's perspective, the possibility of political change in authoritarian regimes fundamentally depends on the ability of individuals, groups, and democratic movements to work simultaneously on the various sources of power, creating and utilizing alternative spaces to penetrate closed spaces. The power structure sustaining the regime is not merely reproduced; it is challenged and deconstructed.[7] From the outside in, the regime is weakened until it gives way. To achieve this, it is necessary to identify the spaces that must be conquered and those from which progress can be made. Additionally, key actors must be mobilized within a new coalition against the status quo. Finally, it is essential to capitalize on opportunities that arise, whether they are significant or sudden changes in social conditions, leadership succession processes within the authoritarian regime, hegemonic crises, divisions within the power bloc –both vertical (fractures between hierarchical levels) and horizontal (rifts among members of the elite)– or a combination of both, as well as favorable international contexts and the emergence of external allies, among other factors.

In summary, identifying strategic entry points and executing intervention sequences that facilitate the transition from alternative

---

7   That is to say, a work of resistance and subversion carried out through the exposure and unmasking of antagonisms, absences, and repressed, suppressed, or ignored contradictions in such narratives or discourses. See: Derrida, J., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida,* With a New Introduction (J. D. Caputo, Ed.). Fordham University Press, 2021.

spaces to closed spaces, including the state security apparatus, particularly the Armed Forces, is crucial. Unless a democratic transition is triggered by external intervention, political change cannot materialize without an internal fracture within the power bloc. The formulation of any strategy for democratic transition must begin with this premise.[8]

Final Observations on Politics, Power, and Violence

The relationship between violence and politics, as well as its connection to power, authority, and legitimacy, has been the subject of intense debates, both from normative and empirical perspectives. The legitimacy of authority rests on the perception of its conformity with legal and social norms. However, the law does not emerge or establish itself on its own. It is instituted by an authority that often has its roots in historical processes and structures that are not necessarily (or initially) legal. The institution of law can thus be understood as the result of an act of force, raising questions about its legitimacy. From a genealogical perspective and through a critical analysis in which the concept is deconstructed, it can be argued that authority, in its origin, both implicitly and explicitly, is established through acts of violence that intertwine symbolic and material manifestations. Therefore, violence, whether in the form of coercion or as the legitimate use

---

8 The fracture should not be seen as a "cause" but as a "condition." When we speak of "fracture," we are not referring to "cracks" that may appear within the leadership of the authoritarian coalition, but to definitive breaks within the power bloc, particularly those in which dissenting or opposing sectors to the maintenance of the status quo are able to mobilize coercive instruments.

of force, is inherent to the establishment and exercise of political power.[9]

Political violence is a communicative act aimed at influencing the decisions of others, thus differing from the mere use of brute force. Its main objective is not to punish or repress, but to dissuade the other. The response can vary, ranging from resistance to submission. Its use entails risks. Reactions can be unpredictable, both from those who suffer it and from those who administer it, potentially even eroding loyalties instead of maintaining or consolidating them and breaking obedience –especially when used on a large scale. When it is purely coercive, power tends to deteriorate, so it never ceases in its effort to legitimize itself, even in authoritarian regimes. Democracy is distinguished by its capacity to transfer or circulate power among elites peacefully, without resorting to violence, which is its main virtue. In contrast, in authoritarian regimes, violence or the threat of its use acts as the final arbiter of politics, to a greater or lesser extent depending on the specific type of regime.

Considering the implications of the points discussed earlier, it can be argued that the persistence of non-competitive authoritarian regimes over time is primarily due to two factors. First, the lack of effective institutional mechanisms that facilitate, force, and guarantee the peaceful transfer of power between

---

9   In Bourdieu, the notion of social power as resources is always linked to that of symbolic power, and symbolic violence is seen as a form of coercion. See: Pierre Bourdieu, "Champ de pouvoir et division du travail de domination". *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*. 5 (190), pp. 126-139, 2011. Clarissa Rile Hayward, "On structural power", *Journal of Political Power*. 11:1, 56-67, 2018. Saul Newman, *From Bakunin to Lacan: Anti-Authoritarianism and the Dislocation of Power,* Lexington Books, 2007.

government and opposition, which is an inherent characteristic of such regimes. Second, the absence of deterrence mechanisms in the hands of opponents or dissenters that could persuade the authoritarian elite –or at least a faction of it– about the need to relinquish power or the risks of resisting change. The absence of credible deterrents makes it much harder for the regime's more conservative factions to engage in negotiations or accept conditions for a democratic transition. Furthermore, for these deterrence mechanisms to be effective, they must target crucial aspects tied to the regime's survival.[10] In authoritarian regimes, deterrence is often linked to the possibility or emergence of an internal fracture capable of triggering violent processes with uncertain outcomes. Fostering perceptions related to this fracture and promoting its materialization in a timely manner and within an appropriate context are essential elements of a strategy to increase the likelihood of a transition to democracy.

---

10 Economic sanctions, for example, are often insufficient to provoke a regime change due to their inability to directly impact the vital processes that sustain non-competitive authoritarian regimes. This limitation is amplified in countries with socialist systems or clientelist capitalist economies, where the regime's main political and economic allies are often other authoritarian regimes.