

“Unity” up for debate

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After more than 24 years under the political regime established by the so-called “Bolivarian Revolution”, many things have changed in Venezuela, while others have persisted. One of these enduring ideas has been the notion that “Unity” among the political forces opposed to Chavismo is absolutely essential to achieve the democratization of our political system. In general terms, this idea tends to be widely accepted, both within the political sphere and among the general public, and it aligns with what specialized literature advocates as a crucial factor in political transitions from authoritarian regimes to democratic ones.

However, given the current situation, it is worth questioning whether the specific way in which the unity of opposition forces has been conceived and practiced in Venezuela deserves to be revisited. Here are some questions that could help: What does this idea of “Unity” specifically mean? Where does it originate from? How has it been put into practice? Are there any prerequisites or necessary conditions for its practical implementation? If such conditions exist, have they been fulfilled in all cases? Moreover, can they be fulfilled under the current circumstances? This essay does not aim to provide exhaustive answers to all these questions; its purpose is to engage in a critical exercise to fuel a debate that, at this point, appears to be necessary for our public opinion.

Background: The Puntofijo Pact and the “unitary” political culture in Venezuela

The idea of “Unity” as it is commonly understood in Venezuelan politics today, has strong foundations and important precedents in our political culture. The Puntofijo Pact is arguably the most significant element in this regard. The agreements reached by Rómulo Betancourt, Rafael Caldera, and Jóvito Villalba, leaders of the country’s three main political parties, facilitated an institutional management of their differences and established the foundations of a democratic regime that lasted for about four decades. Parallel agreements sealed in the spirit of Puntofijo, such as the Labor-Employer Accord¹, the Ecclesiastical Concordat Law², or various agreements with the Armed Forces, also contributed to creating the necessary conditions for the progressive consolidation of democracy.

For several years, the scope of these inter-party pacts went as far as endorsing joint candidacies, reducing the possibility of hostile forces to the nascent democracy winning elections. The formula proved remarkably effective, as it helped establish a political culture of concord and civility that, in turn, became a national trademark. Even the Venezuelan communists, partially excluded from this web of pacts, eventually assimilated themselves after the “pacification” of the 1960s and 1970s, subsequently becoming prominent politicians, academics, or cultural figures.

The success of this “pact democracy” helps us understand how and why governance agreements became ingrained in our country, at least in terms of coordinating the various forces

1 Avenimiento Obrero-Patronal.

2 Ley de Concordato Eclesiástico.

fighting against authoritarianism. The mechanisms of our “pact democracy” even became an exemplary reference for other countries facing similar challenges, such as Spain or Chile, and were frequently studied in specialized literature on transitions to democracy.

Indisputably, the oil rent –nationalized in the mid-1970s– was crucial for the functionality and prestige achieved by this “pacted democracy”. Political scientist Juan Carlos Rey described the regime that emerged from these pacts as a “populist system of elite conciliation”, in which inter-elite agreements were feasible largely due to the availability of abundant oil revenue. This revenue allowed for meeting the demands of the various sectors subscribing to the agreements without any of them having to bear the costs directly.

Apart from the specific problem of rentism in Venezuela, several studies have highlighted certain weaknesses in pacted democracies. One of these weaknesses is that while inter-elite agreements initially foster significant levels of cooperation and stability, over time, they tend to reinforce tight personal connections to the extent that the political system becomes less responsive to popular demands. This can lead to clientelism and “partidocracy”, where the system prioritizes elite realignments rather than addressing the citizens’ needs. These unintended effects are observed in Venezuela and other countries that have employed similar mechanisms for democratization. However, it is common for the drawbacks of these unhealthy dynamics only to be addressed inadequately and belatedly when a general crisis erupts.

1990s: Crisis of "Pacted Democracy," Liberalization, Violent Subversion, and Chavismo

The relative abundance of oil revenues gradually declined over time. When the Pact of Puntofijo was signed, Venezuela had approximately 7 million inhabitants and was producing 3.5 million barrels of oil per day. Three decades later, after the nationalization of the oil industry, hydrocarbon production had not increased, while public debt and the population had in fact grown, reaching around 20 million inhabitants. While the number of diners had tripled, their main source of sustenance remained stable or tended to decrease.

The tensions inherent in this situation intensified with the end of the Cold War and the opening of global trade borders. Venezuela, a distinguished student of the region under the "Cepal" model of import substitution, did not adapt well to the game's new rules. Society as a whole was resistant to the *Gran Viraje* undertaken by Carlos Andrés Pérez during his second presidency, to the point that within less than a decade, a violent social upheaval, two failed military coups, and the removal of the president from office occurred. Despite having a team of top-level technocrats, Pérez committed a political sin in Venezuela at that time: he underestimated the importance of political pacts in a system of "elite reconciliation" by promoting his liberalizing project. Along with the entire country, he paid a tremendous price for it.

The agenda (*Agenda Venezuela*) promoted by his successor, Rafael Caldera, sought to achieve various intersectoral agreements to prevent the necessary reforms from failing like those of Pérez. However, the unprecedented and diverse governing coalition led by Caldera during his second presidency, which was also the first

government to succeed the dominant bipartisanship since 1958, did not put together a succession option. Thus, the unpopularity of his economic measures was exploited by Hugo Chávez to win elections. The Chavista regime, which has always self-identified as the “Bolivarian Revolution”, incurred the paradox of breaking away from the culture of political pacts that had prevailed until then, but under the promise of restoring the state redistribution of national wealth, which supposedly was being prevented at that time –according to Chávez– by the “corruption of the rotten elites”.

1999-2013: “Unity” as a systematic resource for fighting against Chávez’s authoritarianism

After the electoral defeat in 1998, with the constitutional assembly of 1999 and the withdrawal of the main historical leaders of Venezuelan democracy, the political parties that had led national politics for four decades appeared bewildered. Faced with the authoritarian and polarizing drift unleashed by Chávez, and the evident ineffectiveness of the traditional parties in confronting it, numerous political and social forces revived the idea that seems deeply ingrained in our national political DNA: intersectoral agreements are the necessary mechanism to confront an autocratic government.

However, while some conceived it as a procedure aimed at supporting unified candidacies for elected positions, others saw it as a means to promote the overthrow of the government, leading to free elections, similar to the interim government formed after the escape of Pérez Jiménez in January 1958. Thus, the inefficiency of the parties in containing the authoritarian advance of Chávez created a political void that was filled by a massive citizen mobilization, led by Fedecámaras, the Confederation of Venezuelan Workers (CTV), various civil associations, and certain

sectors of the Catholic Church. All this led to the controversial incidents of April 11, 2002.

César Gaviria, then Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS), promoted a dialogue and negotiation table between the Chávez government and the political opposition. The opposition at that time required a united front capable of effectively acting in that instance, and in July of that year, *Coordinadora Democrática* was created, bringing together political parties and non-governmental organizations. Led by Governor Enrique Mendoza of Miranda, *Coordinadora Democrática* remained active during the two years of negotiations and the path toward the recall referendum of August 2004, which was the first electoral process in Venezuela to use voting machines.

The outcome of the referendum, marred by doubts about its fairness, undermined the parties' unity within *Coordinadora Democrática*, which led to the failure to present unified candidacies in the regional elections held in October 2002. Doubts about the transparency of the voting system persisted for at least a year, prompting an electoral boycott in the legislative elections 2005.

In the face of the presidential elections in 2006, Teodoro Petkoff, Julio Borges, and Manuel Rosales played leading roles in reaching the necessary consensus to nominate a unified presidential candidate, ultimately led by the governor of Zulia. This mechanism excluded what the parties always considered a disruptive factor: the presence of non-partisan organizations in the unified structures. The organizing factor introduced by this new unity mechanism, coupled with the pressure generated by the possibility of another electoral boycott by the opposition and the growing popularity of Hugo Chávez, led the Chavismo to

partially relax the contested electoral conditions under which the 2004 referendum was held.

Despite their clear electoral defeat in December 2006, the opposition’s new unity mechanism channeled their actions through electoral means, bolstered the legitimacy of the voting system, and laid the groundwork for a more perfect unity that would be achieved in the coming years, under the new name of the *Mesa de la Unidad Democrática* (MUD). Following the surprising opposition victory in the referendum on constitutional reform in 2007, in a climate of some national economic relief, and in the face of the need to coordinate efforts for the constitutional amendment referendum in 2009 and the parliamentary elections in 2010, the opposition electorate’s confidence in the electoral mechanism significantly increased.

After the technical tie recorded in the parliamentary elections in 2010, a new challenge to the presidential elections in 2012 emerged. To face it, the MUD held internal primaries under very complex conditions, but they turned out to be a success. This led to the creation of a strong, unified candidacy embodied in the figure of Henrique Capriles Radonski, who not only competed against Hugo Chávez in October 2012 –as Chávez was already terminally ill with cancer by that time– but also against his successor Nicolás Maduro in April 2013.

Maduro and the transition towards hegemonic authoritarianism: growing doubts about the “Unity”

While Chávez’s victory in October 2012 was not contested, versions of what happened when Capriles and Maduro faced each other at the polls still abound. However, what is certain is that the unity of opinion regarding the electoral path to confront the

Bolivarian Revolution was shattered there. For certain sectors, the opposition lost the election, and there was nothing more to be done. For others, they won, but the victory was unrecognized by the authoritarian government, so the only option was to turn the page and focus on the next elections: the regional elections at the end of 2013. And for a third sector of the opposition, they achieved a victory that needed to be defended, so it made no sense to continue participating in elections if the Chavismo was not willing to acknowledge their defeat in such processes.

In December of that year, various sectors of the opposition, led by Capriles, participated in public dialogues with Maduro at Miraflores, giving the impression of accepting the takeover of their supposed victory in the presidential elections. The fracture within the opposition would continue to increase until it culminated in February 2014 when a wave of popular protests erupted, lasting nearly four months, which were widely supported and promoted by three particular political leaders: Leopoldo López, María Corina Machado, and Antonio Ledezma. The cycle of protests, dubbed *La Salida* (The Exit) by these sectors, was harshly repressed by the Maduro government.

Contrary to what is sometimes claimed, these internal differences within the opposition were partially overcome in the next major electoral milestone: the parliamentary elections in December 2015. The forces within the MUD managed to reach an agreement to field unified candidacies that were able to reverse one of the advantageous measures implemented by the Chavismo in their electoral engineering: the over-representation that the system had granted to certain electoral districts that had been under their control. As a result, the MUD secured a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly (AN), a result that, if respected, would have allowed them to modify the composition

of the Supreme Court of Justice (TSJ) and the National Electoral Council (CNE).

Similar to 2013, this new electoral victory of the opposition was also undermined. The Chavismo hurriedly appointed new justices to the TSJ through unconstitutional means, while disregarding the victory of several MUD candidates for deputies in the state of Amazonas, thus denying them the two-thirds majority in the National Assembly. Additionally, the TSJ proceeded to veto all the bills passed by the new parliament, while incompetent regional courts did the same with a new recall referendum initiative called for by the MUD in 2016. Furthermore, in 2017, a fraudulent Constituent Assembly was illegitimately installed, which, despite operating for over 3 years, never produced a new constitution, as its sole purpose was to undermine the legislative function of the National Assembly.

It became clear that the problem for the opposition was no longer, as it was during Chavez’s time, the articulation of an electoral majority but rather the challenge of asserting that majority against an autocratic regime that, by that point, was willing to bear all the political costs of disregarding electoral results. Or, to put it in the trendy language of political science, with Maduro, the transition from a *hybrid regime* or *electoral authoritarianism* to *hegemonic authoritarianism* was completed, as documented in indices such as V-Dem or The Economist. These circumstances, along with the sudden collapse of the national economy and the transition from rampant inflation to prolonged hyperinflation in 2017, triggered a new cycle of protests that also contributed to sowing discord within the MUD. As this unitary mechanism languished, the *Frente Amplio Venezuela Libre* (FAVL) was created in early 2018 but has yet to produce concrete results.

This authoritarian drift has only deepened over time, as Maduro carried out another blatant electoral fraud in the presidential elections of May 2018. The company Smartmatic itself indicated that at least one million of the votes attributed by the electoral system to the Chavista president-candidate were false. Faced with such a situation, certain sectors of the opposition conceived a new non-electoral course of action: the National Assembly, still controlled by the MUD, declared the usurpation of the presidency by Nicolás Maduro and appointed an interim government headed by the president of the National Assembly, Deputy Juan Guaidó of the *Voluntad Popular* party. The “interim government” was backed by the governments of nearly 60 countries.

Although the “G-4” –*Primero Justicia, Voluntad Popular, Acción Democrática, and Un Nuevo Tiempo*, the parties with the highest votes in the 2015 legislative elections– formally supported this initiative, their internal divisions became increasingly evident. While certain sectors supported popular protests and initiatives of the interim government, others preferred to participate in any electoral process regardless of the conditions under which it takes place, as well as in all dialogues in which Maduro has agreed to engage –Miraflores, Dominican Republic, Oslo, Barbados, Mexico, Colombia– even if he has never agreed to concede anything substantial.

After the embarrassing situations that took place in Cúcuta (February 22, 2019) and Caracas (April 30, 2019), the scandals related to the handling of Venezuelan state assets by the interim government, the consequences of political persecution, the resounding popular abstention in the 2021 regional elections, and the wear and discredit of a significant part of the leadership that has led the opposition to Chavismo for two decades are more than

evident. All opinion polls confirm this. However, the desire for unity persists, now under the new name of *Plataforma Unitaria*.

Balance and perspectives: What doesn't work in the “Unity”?

With the previous pages, we not only wanted to show to what extent the idea of “Unity” is ingrained in Venezuelan political DNA when the objective is to confront an authoritarian regime, but also the various ways in which this “Unity” has been interpreted, as well as the difficulties it has been facing. For two decades, the political opposition to Chavismo has presented the country with a series of unitary mechanisms that, despite their partial results, have yet to bring about a political change. *Coordinadora Democrática*, *Mesa de la Unidad Democrática*, *Frente Amplio Venezuela Libre*, and *Plataforma Unitaria* are different denominations for a recurring mechanism and a more or less common general purpose, although there is not always a unity of criteria when it comes to advancing towards it.

Now, what is the reason for this lack of results? We will outline here some considerations in this regard, which by no means pretend to be systematic or exhaustive.

1) Structural division between two strategic lines in the face of the fluctuating degree of authoritarianism of the regime: as is often the case when confronting dictatorial regimes, the political opposition in Venezuela has been divided between a sector that prioritizes partial understanding with the authoritarian regime, understanding that only through such cooperation democratization is possible, and others who believe that it is necessary to first establish a political force capable of promoting a general change, assuming that understanding with the autocracy

without the prior construction of that force does not weaken it but rather stabilizes it.

This division of opinions was temporarily sealed during the period 2006-2012, when the failure of other means of struggle, the economic boom of those years, the opposition's victory in the 2007 referendum, and the facilities granted by Chavismo to the opposition (reduced political persecution; the possibility of indefinite reelection since 2019, not only for the president but also for governors and mayors, etc.) strengthened the perception that change could be gradual and electoral. During that time, the population could lead a relatively normal life while opposition parties built a political foundation for change.

But with Nicolás Maduro in power, things changed drastically. An economic collapse accompanied his systematic disregard for opposition electoral victories reflected in an 80% contraction of the GDP in 8 years, as well as one of the most drastic and prolonged hyperinflation cycles in modern economic history. All of this triggered a humanitarian crisis that led to the exodus of over 6 million Venezuelans, surpassing a total of 7 million people living abroad today. Under such conditions, the need for change has increased, and the debate about the most suitable methods of struggle within the political opposition has necessarily been reopened.

In light of the above, it is important to highlight two particular aspects. Firstly, considerations regarding "Unity" cannot ignore the living conditions imposed on Venezuelans by the autocratic regime, as this will determine the sense of urgency that political action must assume. 24 years of Chavista domination have not only devastated the country and severely compromised the future of several generations of Venezuelans but also made

chronic collapse in the country increasingly likely. Secondly, the approach to electoral means must consider the levels of authoritarianism that the autocratic regime is willing to deploy since, while electoral authoritarianism may accept some defeats, hegemonic authoritarianism will not recognize any electoral victory that threatens its hegemony.

2) Selective intimidation, extortion, and co-optation by Chavismo: While Nicaragua under Daniel Ortega receives all the hemispheric criticism for its blatant and crude despotism, Venezuela under Maduro seems to always be given a certain benefit of the doubt on the international stage, where there is no shortage of sectors that appear more focused on calling for the lifting of foreign sanctions (coinciding with the demands of the authoritarian regime in Venezuela) rather than demanding the democratization of the Venezuelan political system.

None of this is coincidental. Chavismo surpasses the current Sandinismo in its capacity to exert true hegemonic control. This control is not only exercised through the primitive use of violence by state and para-state repressive forces, but for years it has deployed immense efforts to divide and co-opt entire sectors of the political opposition, many of which have become repeaters of the authoritarian regime's official discourse. While Chavismo has been forced to employ mass repression to repress street protests, it has used not only selective threats that can escalate to any form of violence but also more subtle forms of action such as blackmail, extortion, and co-optation to combat opposition parties.

For years, significant sectors of the "political country" vehemently denied that multiple political figures, who were militants in opposition ranks, had been co-opted by the Chavista regime. But with the public revelation of the so-called "scorpions",

any doubts have been more than cleared. In addition to that, enormous difficulties have been imposed on the free financing and action of opposition organizations. The role of the so-called “*boliburguesía*”, as well as prominent frontmen of the ruling regime, has become increasingly evident in this regard, casting doubt on the true interests behind the actions of multiple “opposition” political organizations.

Ultimately, indefinite resistance becomes extremely costly in a society as frightened and impoverished as Venezuela. All of this impacts the stability, transparency, and purpose of the unitary mechanisms where, sometimes, not everyone who should be there is present, and many of those who are present do not truly belong. In the worst-case scenario, the “Unity” risks becoming a mechanism for disguising actions that are actually driven by the autocracy itself.

3) **The “secret life” of political parties:** Those who uncritically preach “Unity” as a necessary, infallible, and sufficient formula for fighting authoritarianism often –whether voluntarily or involuntarily– divert attention from a crucial factor: Who are the ones joining forces and what are they doing? Beyond the rhetoric about the unity of Venezuelans against the dictatorship, the advocated “Unity” is, in concrete terms, a mechanism that generates unified candidacies for elected positions, nominated by specific political parties to capture all the popular rejection of Chavismo. However, one of the least analyzed topics is the political parties’ functioning in this mechanism.

By definition, a political party represents a portion of the population. Modern representative democracy operates based on political parties because it recognizes the intrinsic plurality of society. Parties capture that plurality through their differentiated

platforms, where the differences are assumed to be *based on doctrinal reasons*: those who advocate for the same type of ideas come together to support the party that promotes them, and there will be as many parties as there are organized sets of ideas that need to be defended.

This is not the case in present-day Venezuela. Many parties and personalities opposing Chavismo do not typically integrate different political organizations based on their doctrinal or programmatic differences. In fact, the vast majority of them share a substantially similar ideology rooted in socialism or social democracy. So why don't they join forces in a single major social-democratic political organization, as *Acción Democrática* was in the 20th century? Firstly, since the decentralization process began in the 1990s, many leaders saw the direct election of governors and mayors as an opportunity to establish their own separate entities. Secondly, for many years, the traditional parties have not adequately facilitated the generational transition of their main leadership positions.

In other words, a significant part of the dispersion among opposition political forces is not due to a clash of values or different ideas about what the country should be, which should be a central aspect of public debate. Instead, it stems from *a clash of individual aspirations that cannot be managed under a unified party discipline*. Consequently, the “Unity” movement primarily focuses on resolving personal rather than doctrinal differences, which ideally should be managed within the same political organization. Additionally, problems related to corruption, clientelism, and the persistent practice of capturing public resources persist. While political parties inherently tend to operate as interest groups instead of systematically representing the interests of broad

sectors of the population, these tendencies are even more amplified within the current party system in Venezuela.

In addition to that, many of our politicians show a great reluctance to understand that the national political economy can no longer function materially as it did during the second half of the 20th century. The characteristic features of a rentier economy and a “populist system of elite conciliation”, which greatly contributed to the decline of Venezuelan democracy, are no longer viable in a country increasingly resembling those in Central America. Post-conflict devastation, endemic violence, weak state capacities, purely extractive economies, a small GDP, and a significant proportion of income derived from a large diaspora are often defining and decisive traits in these countries.

In summary, it seems unlikely that the “Unity” movement can possess a substantially different nature from the sectors that comprise it. Nevertheless, serious and methodical studies on this nature are scarce in Venezuela, possibly because the mechanisms of elite conciliation –whether political, economic, academic, or otherwise– continue to operate behind the scenes.

4) The blurring of the electoral path and the distortion of the purpose of “Unity”: In a democracy, when the population feels betrayed by their political representatives, the option of changing them in the next electoral process remains open. However, since Nicolás Maduro came to power, that option has been denied: his government does not recognize electoral defeats that would lead to a legitimate and peaceful transfer of power. This situation has also harmed the legitimacy of the opposition political forces themselves, as it forces them to confront a series of interconnected dilemmas:

- a) If Chavismo’s refusal to recognize opposition victories prevents them from bringing about political change, what is the point of continuing to vote under the same electoral conditions without somehow increasing the political cost for the dictatorship to act fraudulently?
- b) If in the face of every undermined victory, the message from opposition leadership is to avoid conflict and focus on the next election, thereby creating incentives for a new victory to also be disregarded, what purpose does that opposition leadership serve in the eyes of the people?
- c) If the message of the opposition aligns with that of the Chavismo, and if opposition candidates who manage to be elected as mayors or governors only receive resources from the public treasury to the extent that they comply with the directives of the autocratic regime, what substantial difference exists, for the voter who expects effective governance, between voting for the opposition and voting for the Chavismo?
- d) If, under such circumstances, the “Unity” operates not so much as a community of transcendent purposes but rather as a cartel, monopolizing all available options to become the only alternative to Chavismo without making an effort to respond to the people, and preventing the voting mechanism from serving citizens to express their discontent and choose a specific option, is this “Unity” truly serving the Venezuelan people? Does the “Unity” then become a mechanism for self-preservation of political parties in the face of popular rejection, contributing to hindering citizen expression and disillusionment with politics?

In conclusion: What can be done?

The Puntofijo Pact, the foundational stone on which the main democratic period in our history was built, was agreed upon after the fall of the Marcos Pérez Jiménez dictatorship, involving a small number of highly representative leaders, each heading political organizations with clear ideologies that enjoyed significant legitimacy. They reached minimum agreements regarding the rules of political coexistence, as well as the tasks of governance, in a country that at that time had a thriving oil industry that allowed for significant public spending.

It is unnecessary to explain in detail that most, if not all, of the elements highlighted in the previous paragraph, are absent in today's Venezuela. Does this mean that the current "Unity" is an incorrect path to confront the country's democratization struggle? Rather, it means that much needs to be done for our current political organizations to regain the necessary conditions to deploy an effective unity mechanism, thereby honoring our political tradition of pacts and agreements in the face of authoritarian threats. This tremendous pending task is not solely the responsibility of professional politicians but also the citizens' responsibility.

On the one hand, if our political leadership wants to regain the trust of the people, and if they want the "Unity" to achieve its maximum effectiveness in confronting the autocratic regime, it would be highly recommended that, as a first step, public debates held by parties and political leaders revolve around doctrinal principles, programmatic proposals, and issues of general interest, rather than privileging more or less covert disputes based on personal antagonisms. Likewise, it would be extremely beneficial for organizations that do not have major ideological disagreements

to unite under the same party, avoiding divisions that are useless from every perspective for the citizens.

Similarly, internal purification and timely generational change would help increase the credibility of these parties among the electorate. The unity mechanism should not serve as an excuse to postpone the necessary accountability to the citizens or to block any attempt to renew party leadership. The fact that the dictatorship distorts the electoral processes controlled by the State should not prevent opposition forces from holding their own internal electoral processes to guarantee the renewal and legitimacy of their leaders before the Venezuelan people. In the current situation, unified primaries held without the control of the National Electoral Council, which Chavismo oversees, would be a very positive step in that direction.

It is clear that the structural division within the opposition, between those sectors that tend to prioritize some form of cooperative action with the ruling regime and those that tend to reject such cooperation, complicates their joint action. However, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that this division is due to a natural plurality of perspectives, each of which reflects an aspect of reality. And despite each sector of the Venezuelan opposition accusing the other of a lack of results, the truth is that no course of action attempted so far has fully achieved the ultimate objective, although each may boast of having achieved certain partial results.

In reality, there has always been some level of basic cooperation among the different sectors of the opposition, partly because there is –or so we want to believe– a common overarching goal, and partly because this challenging cooperation has not necessarily arisen from conviction, but from necessity. Reality has

repeatedly shown that the fight against an autocratic regime like the one currently prevailing in Venezuela does not seem feasible, neither when conducted under the guidelines of the apostles of uncritical, obedient, and silent voting that ignores the conditions in which it takes place, nor from the standpoint of those who consider any electoral initiative to be utterly useless, relying on courses of action that have also proven incapable of practical implementation. At least from our point of view, reality seems to advise a difficult combination of means of struggle through the political construction of a force that will only be feasible if political organizations can articulate the urgent and profound desire for change that afflicts the vast majority of Venezuelans.

Regarding citizens who are not members of political organizations, they have the responsibility to actively participate in various aspects of political action, each according to their capabilities. This includes demanding respect for their human and constitutional rights, seeking the most accurate information possible about public affairs, engaging in national debates, and ensuring that the actions of political representatives align as closely as possible with their demands. In the context of present-day Venezuela, this implies closely monitoring the integrity of the unity mechanism, as it is a political resource that is justified in principle in the face of an autocratic system. However, it also, unfortunately, allows perpetuating the exercise of power by unrepresentative politicians and defending the interests of different sectors within the political and economic elites.

An opposition that does not oppose

Ana Milagros Parra

When looking at the political history of Venezuela from the early years of the so-called Bolivarian Revolution, one of its most notable characteristics was the pronounced dichotomy and division of society between Chavismo and the opposition. This process of social polarization intensified especially during the period 2000-2004 when various institutions (educational, religious, community-based, police, military, media, academic, etc.) and different social sectors took sides in favor of or against one of two positions: the government or the opposition¹.

The generation of those years grew up and developed in a society in conflict and divided between “the good guys and the bad guys,” regardless of which side they were on. Between the “reds” and the “blues,” between the illusion of change that was only possible if their side was in power, between the perpetuation of the new authoritarianism in the country and the fear of what was to come. Families, friends, work groups, and neighbors were engulfed in a sea of polarization, where political conversation was always present in gathering places and common areas, and

1 Mireya Lozada, “¿Nosotros o Ellos? Representaciones Sociales, polarización y espacio Público en Venezuela”, Scielo (*Cuadernos del Cendes*, December 2008), obtained from: http://ve.scielo.org/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S101225082008000300006

one side believed that it was possible to change the government through institutional and democratic means.

Over the years, a group ensured that they would never relinquish power, and with the death of the patriarch of the regime and the need for adaptation and survival, especially after a Complex Humanitarian Emergency and waves of protests, the government of Nicolás Maduro gradually erased that duality that characterized the country's politics, turning it into a photograph full of shades of gray, making it increasingly difficult for the population to identify the actors, positions, and, above all, to point out the "guilty parties".

Venezuela is in a new stage of political conflict, with a ruler who inherited a hybrid regime (competitive authoritarianism) and turned it into full-fledged authoritarianism, or as referred to in this article, hegemonic authoritarianism. That is why there is a need to analyze its new characteristics in depth, to understand that they are not static in their way of existing, and to avoid the mistake of interpreting the new reality through the lens of the past decade. In this reality, the opposition was seen as a moderately homogeneous bloc with actors pursuing the same goal: achieving a change of government. Currently, everything is shades of gray. The situation is not that simple.

This text does not aim to delve into the complexity of this new stage but rather to focus on two aspects that allowed its consolidation: The difference between the Chávez and Maduro regimes, and the techniques used by power against the opposition to gradually turn it into an opposition that does not oppose.

Background

The era of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela was a period of political and social transformation, which saw the emergence of a strong opposition, primarily characterized by its rejection of the Chavista government's centralization policies and its authoritarian governance style. This opposition comprised a wide range of groups, including political parties, civil society organizations, business leaders, and student groups, who sought a change in the country's direction and feared the path on which their nation was heading.

It is important to note that the claim that the opposition and Venezuelans "never did anything" to change the government is far from reality, and within that narrative, there's a manipulation by a regime that strengthens its control strategies and justifies popular frustration. The is not to imply that the opposition was flawless and free of errors; nor is it to suggest that the government bears sole responsibility for the unsuccessful attempts at democratic transition. It is necessary to consider a complex causality where nuances exist, so discarding dichotomous views is a priority, as they cloud the overall understanding of the situation. The Venezuelan political landscape is unpredictable and constantly changing, with a regime that gradually mutates and evolves in its techniques of manipulation and control.

However, while the opposition group coordinated attempts at civil resistance and used all available institutional methods within the already battered Venezuelan democracy, they witnessed a government responding by intensifying its authoritarian processes, refining its strategies against the population and the opposition, and mutating to survive and remain in power. With a dying Chávez pointing out with his finger who the "people"

should choose as his successor, it was the final proof that only vestiges of democracy remained.

To better illustrate the Venezuelan opposition's attempts to bring about a change of government, the following are mentioned as the most decisive milestones:

Civic and oil strikes and coup d'état

Margarita López Maya describes the major milestones of the beginning of the century as follows:

Between late 2001 and January 2003, six confrontations took place in Venezuelan society between the government and the opposition. In December 2001, the confrontation led to a civic strike, the first of four, which was met with the hardening of the presidential discourse and threats from government party leaders against the democratic order. From then on, polarization and confrontation intensified, culminating in the second civic strike in April 2002, which served as a prelude to the coup d'état on the 11th. With this coup and Chavez's return to power 48 hours later, the depth of the Venezuelan sociopolitical fracture was revealed, and a political crisis ensued. The dialogue, negotiation, and agreement initiatives attempted in the following months did not produce significant results. In that December, an impasse was reached once again between the two blocs, leading the opposition to organize a fourth civic strike, which, like in April, resulted in an insurrectional situation².

2 Margarita López Maya, *Insurrecciones de 2002 en Venezuela. Causa e implicaciones*, (CLACSO, 2003).

The recall referendum of 2004

In August 2004, the opposition organized a petition to call for a referendum to revoke Chávez's presidential mandate. Over 2 million Venezuelans signed the petition, and the referendum took place in August 2004. Although the referendum's result favored Chávez, the opposition won 40% of the votes, demonstrating their electoral strength and popular support, once again highlighting the country's polarization.

The presidential elections of 2012/2013

In October 2012, the opposition presented Henrique Capriles Radonski as their presidential candidate to challenge Chávez in the presidential elections. Chávez won the election, but shortly after his victory, he passed away, leading to another presidential election between Capriles and Maduro. The result was a victory for Maduro, amidst protests of electoral fraud.

The 2014 protests

In February 2014, a series of protests began throughout the country against the government of Maduro, who had assumed the presidency after Chávez's death. The protests were called for by students and civil society, and were violently suppressed by security forces. The protests continued for several months and resulted in the death of over 40 people. The repressive and dictatorial nature of the government became increasingly evident.

The legislative elections of 2015

In December 2015, the opposition achieved a historic victory in the parliamentary elections, obtaining a qualified majority in

the National Assembly. The opposition's victory was a blow to the government of Maduro, who had been reelected in 2013.

2017 protests

The protests began in April 2017 after the Supreme Court of Justice (TSJ) issued a ruling dissolving the National Assembly, which was controlled by the opposition. This, combined with the country's economic collapse leading to one of the highest inflation rates in the world, prompted people to take to the streets to demand the restoration of the legislative power and denounce the growing government repression.

The government's response to the protests was violent. Security forces used tear gas, bullets, and other methods to disperse the demonstrators, leading to numerous violent clashes. It was reported that at least 125 people were killed during the protests. The world's attention turned to Venezuela due to the blatant human rights violations during the protests and the escalating humanitarian and economic crisis.

Proclamation of Juan Guaidó as interim president

The leader of Voluntad Popular assumed the presidency of the National Assembly elected in 2015, and later used his position to drive a new wave against the government, this time more institutional and focused on international support. It was one of the most challenging moments for the government. In the end, they survived.

Among the mentioned milestones, it is important to emphasize the legislative elections of 2015, as it was the decisive turning point in the process of autocratization of the

Venezuelan government system: It transitioned from a *competitive authoritarianism* to a completely closed and *hegemonic* one. The following section defines and characterizes each one:

Types of political regime

Competitive authoritarianism

In competitive authoritarian regimes, formal democratic institutions are considered the primary means to obtain and exercise political authority. However, rulers violate democratic rules so frequently and to such an extent that the regime fails to meet the conventional minimum criteria for democracy. The rulers in these regimes violate democratic norms enough to create an uneven playing field between the government and the opposition. Although elections are held regularly, and usually without massive fraud, rulers systematically abuse the media, harass opposition candidates and their supporters, and in some cases manipulate electoral results. Journalists, opposition politicians, and other government critics can be spied on, threatened, harassed, or detained³.

In this type of regime:

1. The ruling party or coalition dominates the state, uses state resources for its own benefit, and relies on state institutions such as the police and judiciary to harass, intimidate, or even imprison political opponents.

3 Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way., "Elections Without Democracy. The rise of competitive authoritarianism", *Journal of Democracy*, 2002.

2. The opposition enjoys limited political rights and freedoms, and is often subjected to arbitrary detentions, harassment, or physical violence.
3. Civil society and the media are often co-opted, repressed, or subjected to censorship, making it difficult for the opposition voices to be heard.

According to the above, it can be affirmed that a) the Venezuelan regime could be broadly classified as competitive authoritarianism, and b) it did not meet the minimum parameters to be considered a democracy, not even a “flawed democracy”. While formal democratic institutions are widely considered the main means to access power, its leaders’ increasing abuse of the Venezuelan state gives them a significant advantage over their opponents.

Under Chávez, Venezuela frequently held periodic and multiparty elections that, in general, appeared to be free and fair. The electoral façade gave them legitimacy to govern the country arbitrarily under the pretext of the “will of the people”. However, in 2015, a few years into Maduro’s government, the excuse for popular power through elections ceased to be viable. The government became vulnerable and needed to manipulate the tentacles of the State and its institutions to remain in power, obstructing the Legislative Branch and leaving the 2015 elections as the last electoral event where the population could effectively choose.

They made sure to close any avenue for the opposition to reach power institutionally, resulting in a consolidated and hegemonic authoritarianism.

Hegemonic authoritarianism

In this type of authoritarianism, “there can be a formally recognized political authority that assumes almost all political power. Despite having experienced processes of political liberalization, such as the recognition of political pluralism, only the parties or candidates associated with the ruling power have a real possibility of accessing public positions and institutions. Therefore, elections, although they may be pluralistic, exclude the opposition and are thus not competitive. Likewise, rights and freedoms are highly restricted and continuously subject to threats from the authorities. Certain ethnic, religious, and regional groups may be marginalized in terms of civil rights, and significant conflicts may exist in some of these areas”⁴.

Therefore, hegemonic authoritarianism is understood as a type of authoritarian regime in which a single political party or coalition dominates the political system and controls all aspects of political life but allows a certain level of opposition and civil society participation. This type of regime combines formal institutions such as elections and courts with informal networks of power and influence that operate outside of these institutions, enabling the ruling party or coalition to maintain control over the political system and society as a whole.

The key characteristic of hegemonic authoritarianism is the “dual structure of power” created by the ruling party or coalition. This dual structure includes formal institutions such

4 Inmaculada Szmolka Vida, “Los regímenes políticos híbridos: Democracias y autoritarismos con adjetivos. Su conceptualización, categorización y operacionalización dentro de la tipología de regímenes políticos”, *Revista de Estudios Políticos*, Universidad de Granada, 2010.

as elections and courts, as well as informal networks of power and influence operating outside of these institutions⁵. The ruling party or coalition utilizes this dual structure to maintain control over the political system and society as a whole, allowing them to implement all the “playbook” strategies against anyone who opposes them, even within their own ranks. The current government of Nicolas Maduro in the country serves as the best example of this phenomenon.

What explains, then, the evolution of the regime type in Venezuela? What role does the opposition play?

The change in the game’s rules for an opposition that was never prepared for the authoritarian and repressive political system transformation is relevant to explain the shift between types of authoritarianism in the country. While the government found ways to keep its coalition strategically united against any threat, the opposition struggled more and more to unite in order to confront the sole adversary. It is for this reason that, upon recognizing the weakness of a fragmented opposition, the government⁶ implemented traditional strategies of division, which are explained below:

To mitigate the persistent threats that cannot be eliminated through free elections, authoritarian regimes have two strategies up their sleeve: repression and cooptation. These strategies are not mutually exclusive, but rather the political context determines

5 Guillermo O’Donnell, *El Estado Burocrático Autoritario* (Editorial Belgrano 1982).

6 Both Chavez and Maduro, but in the article, the focus is on the government of Maduro.

the manner and aggressiveness with which one or the other is applied⁷.

Repression: Repression is perhaps the most obvious survival strategy in authoritarian or dictatorial regimes. It is fundamental and constitutes part of their nature and way of governing. It is a form of sociopolitical control the authorities apply against those who engage in activities or hold beliefs that the regime perceives as threatening to political order⁸. This is effective as it increases the costs of opposing the government, making disloyalty the least attractive option. Governing through fear.

Repression comes in many forms depending on the ruler's purpose; the two main categories are *a)* repression of empowerment rights and *b)* repression of physical integrity rights. The first form of repression targets civil liberties: censorship, restrictions on civil associations, and other actions that typically affect the general population. The second form of repression primarily affects individuals and is the most severe: torture, forced disappearances, and increased political prisoners.

Nicolas Maduro has been accused of human rights violations through the worst type of repression, systematically carried out within his ranks. However, currently, the following type of strategy predominates due to the government's need for an institutional facade in front of the international community.

7 Erica Frantz and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, "A dictator's toolkit: Understanding how co-optation affects repression in autocracies", *Journal of Peace Research*, 2014.

8 Robert Goldstein, *Political repression in Modern America: From 1870 to the Present*, (Cambridge, 1978).

Cooptation: Cooptation is defined as the intentional extension of government benefits to opposition elites by autocratic leaders in exchange for their loyalty, acquiescence, or cooperation. Autocrats coopt opposition party leaders by providing them access to patronage resources, appointing them to key political positions, and/or granting them limited political concessions. In return, opposition leaders are expected to cooperate with the rulers by supporting their political initiatives and refraining from undertaking collective actions against the regime⁹.

Accumulating loyalties through cooptation is instrumental in maintaining political order, as repression comes with its costs and increases popular discontent, becoming a breeding ground for protests. Therefore, “encapsulating” opposition groups (political parties, business federations, significant segments of the population) is important because it allows the autocratic regime to control them so that, in any circumstance, especially when they feel destabilized, they can be used in their favor and help improve their image. Cooptation is particularly effective when these groups are integrated into state institutions.

Cooptation is insidious, as coopted opposition members often remain within their parties while following a conciliatory line in line with the objectives of the authoritarian regime. Many of them have their own parties, which, in exchange for the aforementioned benefits, are allowed minor public positions that do not threaten the stability of the government in power. Over time, this leads to different “oppositions” that differ in their objectives. This is how authoritarian regimes manufacture an opposition that does not truly oppose them.

9 Berker Kavasoglu, *Opposition Parties and Elite Co-optation in Electoral Autocracies*, (V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg, 2021).

Having discussed the two predominant strategies of authoritarianism, it is important to emphasize the current reality in Venezuela. The objective of the article is to highlight the contrast between an opposition that once confronted the regime and the current opposition, which has been driven into a kind of clandestinity, with many covertly coopted faces, while there are other parties and leaders who are openly aligned with the regime. With Venezuela entering a new political phase, there is an opportunity for opposition regrouping, albeit in a much more limited and dangerous context where distrust prevails, and the tools for opposition become increasingly perilous. Adding to this is the population's apathy, as they do not see true representatives in the opposition, and the government propaganda attempting to sell a stability and economic boom that is far from reality.

Perhaps the most vocal opposition currently is the one that does not truly oppose, but the discontent among the people longing for freedom is growing. The opposition will hold significant untapped political capital, waiting to be harnessed honestly and responsibly.