2024 Elections: A Potential Turning Point?

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The Chavista-Madurista regime, established by the so-called Bolivarian Revolution, has been in power for a quarter of a century. The balance is evident to all and could hardly be more catastrophic: destroyed institutions, ruined economy, families torn apart. Other countries in the hemisphere are not spared from these terrible consequences either, as they receive nearly 8 million Venezuelan migrants and are subject to undue interference by Nicolás Maduro's regime.

However, Venezuela is not the only country to have undergone such a collapse, nor is it the first time it has experienced it. Throughout history, almost all societies have suffered critical processes that reach a turning point sooner or later, which, in the best cases, is related to some kind of political learning that allows establishing the foundations for a long development period.

Based on the above, many questions arise regarding the Venezuelan case, especially as the 2024 presidential elections emerge as an opportunity for political change. Could this electoral juncture be a turning point amid the current national drift? Have we, as a society, developed any kind of political learning to seize this opportunity? Are there elements to suggest that we are facing a potential political change? What is

the significance of the upcoming presidential elections in Venezuela for our hemisphere?

The following pages attempt to provide some answers to these questions in reverse sequence from the one in the previous paragraph. This article does not offer the reader a scenario analysis; it is not an exercise in political foresight, nor does it attempt to answer, through a methodologically rigorous approach, a formally stated research question. The sole purpose of this article is to explore the reasons (potentially active today) for what might happen in the short and medium term if, against all odds, things were to go relatively well in 2024 or some time afterwards.

a. The international relevance of the Venezuelan case: A national process with external repercussions

A careful retrospective reveals the extent to which the so-called Bolivarian Revolution has significantly influenced Latin America. This is demonstrated by some of the most relevant changes in the region over the last quarter-century, especially in multilateral institutions. In this context, how much the Chavista-Madurista Venezuela has directly contributed to fostering these changes is evident.

When Hugo Chávez assumed the presidency in 1999, the main frameworks of regional cooperation and integration were the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), the Andean Community of Nations (CAN), and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), mechanisms that were strengthened or emerged during the liberal wave of the 1990s. The Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) was also outlined

as a commercial cooperation initiative theoretically destined to encompass the entire hemisphere. These frameworks were supplemented by the Organization of American States (OAS), which since 1948 has been the region's principal political forum, primarily at the initiative of the United States.

Twenty-five years later, the landscape has changed substantially. MERCOSUR has lost much of the specific weight it exerted in South America, while CAN has been reduced to its minimum expression. On the other hand, the Trump administration reviewed NAFTA to become the USMCA, while the OAS plays a considerably diminished role compared to the past. As often opposing frameworks, new regional political forums have emerged, such as the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), and the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA). Although these frameworks may not necessarily be in good health, they have contributed to diminishing the power and influence of the previous ones.

In all these cases, the Venezuela of Chávez and Maduro has played an active role in modifying the system of multilateral organizations that predominated in the region. Chávez energetically moved to debilitate the FTAA in 2005 and withdrew Venezuela from the CAN in 2006 while rushing to found the ALBA in 2004 and the CELAC (with Cuba and Bolivia as the three promoting states) in 2010-2011. Similarly, Chávez supported the government of Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva in the creation of UNASUR in 2008. For his part, Maduro announced Venezuela's withdrawal from the OAS in 2017. In

short, the Bolivarian Revolution has been decisive in causing significant changes in regional cooperation mechanisms.

Chávez's and Maduro's Venezuela has also enthusiastically helped countries like China, but especially Russia and Iran, increase their operations in Latin America. Close to a dozen Ibero-American countries purchase weaponry from Moscow, but Russia has become Venezuela's leading arms supplier. As for the networks of Shiism in South America, the evidence of the cooperation Iran provides to the incumbent Venezuelan government seems to be increasing.

The Bolivarian Revolution has also notably influenced the deterioration of democracy on the continent. When Chávez came to power in 1999, the only authoritarian regime in the hemisphere was Castro's regime in Cuba. Today, not only has that regime been strengthened with support from Chavismo-Madurismo, but the government of Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua has also received similar assistance to establish itself as a dictatorship. In Bolivia, authoritarianism prevails, winning elections, and Venezuela itself has an autocratic regime.

Other countries governed by allies of the Bolivarian Revolution, such as Honduras and Ecuador, also show significant setbacks in the quality of their democracies, while suspicions abound that social upheavals like those recorded in Chile in 2019 or Colombia in 2021 may have been instigated or intensified by Nicolás Maduro's regime. Even the constitutional processes that have resulted in varying outcomes in several countries in the region (Bolivia, Ecuador, Chile) seem to find in

the Venezuelan case a pattern to follow and undeniable diplomatic support.

However, the most noticeable consequence that the Bolivarian Revolution seems to be exerting in the region is the number of Venezuelan migrants moving throughout Latin America, North America, and Europe. South American countries receive more than six out of the nearly eight million Venezuelans living abroad today, a circumstance that has significantly altered their societies' social and political dynamics. In several cases, the infiltration of Venezuelan criminal organizations (with the Aragua Train at the forefront) raises animosities that, unfortunately, end up penalizing the entire migrant population.

As if this were not enough, the Chavista-Madurista influence in the region continues to become increasingly complex. The recent murder in Santiago, Chile, of Venezuelan lieutenant Ronald Ojeda, who had sought asylum in that country after enduring Venezuelan dungeons, only serves to increase doubts and suspicions regarding the operations carried out throughout the region by Venezuelan organized crime organizations and the Venezuelan regime itself.

It's important to note that all of the above emerges as a consequence of the revolutionary nature of the Chavista-Madurista regime. A revolutionary state seeks to subvert the established norms regulating the behavior of actors in the international system. Typically, revolutionary states repeatedly express their radical dissatisfaction with the current international order and seek to "export the revolution" they are

developing in their own country, resorting to conventional and unconventional mechanisms for this purpose.

In light of these factors, elections in Venezuela will be significant for the hemisphere to the extent that they indeed can foster change. Just as many communist dictatorships collapsed with the Soviet Union, which became an irreplaceable pillar for all of them, an eventual collapse of the Chavista-Madurista regime would likely have significant ripples throughout the region, especially in countries like Cuba and Nicaragua, which are dictatorships closely aligned with Venezuela. Recent polls indicate two contrasting migratory trends that could arise from this juncture: the potential return of many emigrants in the event of a change in Venezuela or the increase in emigration if the regime consolidates its power.

b. María Corina Machado's leadership and the party system's imbalance

What are the real opportunities for the 2024 elections to bring about significant political change in Venezuela? On the one hand, the odds seem against it, especially if we weigh the anti-democratic inertia implanted in the country over 25 years of Chavismo-Madurismo. On the other hand, unprecedented, disruptive dynamics are emerging that could eventually derail such inertia. Let's examine both trends and how they oppose each other.

Firstly, what do we mean by "*anti-democratic inertia*"? Initially, *Chavismo was always clear that it intended to undermine liberal democracy to perpetuate itself in power*. From the outset, it took advantage of its initial popularity to dismantle the

foundations of the democratic system. It insisted on the need to change all the fundamental rules of the Civil Republic, starting with the Constitution, then proceeding with the automation of elections and the enactment of enabling laws, culminating with repression and control of PDVSA, the National Electoral Council, and the Supreme Court of Justice.

Faced with the ineffectiveness of political institutions in halting this onslaught in its early years, broad sectors of Venezuelan society initiated a resistance that was as tenacious as it was disorganized and fruitless. Sectoral and general strikes, marches and rallies, elections and protests, various unity schemes, several referendums, a fleeting overthrow of President Chávez, and even an interim government have been the primary mechanisms to seek political change that has failed to materialize.

As recently pointed out by Steven Levitsky, contemporary Venezuela "defies the laws of political gravity". Despite the opposition's determined efforts, an unpopular and authoritarian government like Maduro's has managed to perpetuate itself in power for over a decade. This outcome is partly due to the type of political regime that Chávez bequeathed, expressly prepared to control the population through intelligence mechanisms and repression rooted in Castro's strategies. Similarly, the negotiating skills that Maduro himself has been forced to develop have been a decisive factor in his continued grip on power.

Maduro lacks Chávez's charisma, though this is not his main handicap. Two more grave factors distinguish him from his

predecessor: He has no background in the armed forces and has not experienced a similar surge in oil prices. The first factor has made him notably dependent on a figure like Vladimir Padrino López to control the military establishment, unlike Chávez, who frequently changed his Defense ministers and top military commanders. However, Maduro has likely developed greater independence in the relationship with Cuba.

As for the second factor, Maduro inherited a profoundly indebted economy, reliant on imports and continuous rises in oil prices. Chávez was determined to subdue and expropriate the private sector while politicizing and dismantling PDVSA. Thanks to the boom in oil prices and through the expansion of public spending, he promoted domestic consumption, which was later satisfied with imports from allied governments. He bolstered a gigantic clientelist apparatus through the so-called "*misiones*". At the same time, abundant subsidies and excessive exchange controls completely distorted the value of the currency and the labor-benefit relationship until the system collapsed early on in Maduro's presidency.

The ensuing hyperinflation was the main trigger for long cycles of protests in 2014 and 2017, which were heavily repressed by state and para-state forces. During those years, the Obama administration began implementing personal sanctions against senior officials of the Venezuelan regime. In that context, a constituent assembly was installed (which, after three years, did not produce any constitution), and fraudulent elections were held in 2018, leading the opposition to form an interim government in 2019. To navigate these challenges, Maduro became accustomed to maneuvering adeptly through

various dialogues facilitated by foreign actors, during which he gained time without conceding much in return.

If the aforementioned factors were not enough to generate an almost chronic disillusionment in the population, we must add the enormous emigration that surged from 2017 onward and the political demobilization prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, a momentum of apathy and widespread hopelessness was fully formed in the country. The disillusioned proliferated just as much as those who preached the need to adapt. However, this latter is difficult to accept for most Venezuelans living in increasingly desperate conditions.

On the other hand, and perhaps precisely because of the numerous abuses and injustices suffered by Venezuelan society, *the electoral situation of 2024 could be shaping up as an unprecedented opportunity for profound change in Venezuela*. This change may not be limited to the individuals in government or stop at a change in the political regime but extends to the fundamental nature of the state-society relationships that have long prevailed in our country. After all, nature does not leap. Only when most of the elements sustaining a system have collapsed do the conditions and principles for the emergence of something substantially new begin to solidify.

Some of the ongoing factors and disruptive dynamics can be considered. A first factor worth noting is *the party system crisis that has been consolidating over the last three decades*, arising from the bipartisan system crisis dominated by Acción Democrática (AD) and COPEI in the previous thirty years. The collapse of these two major parties in 1993 gave rise, during the

1990s, to a relatively atomized system composed of a plurality of leadership and political organizations stemming from the dismantling of AD and COPEI. Often, these new figures emerged during and as a result of the decentralization promoted by the Commission for State Reform (COPRE).

Amidst this atomization, Hugo Chávez emerged as a militaristic and populist outsider, rallying multiple political actors whose only common denominator was their disloyalty to the previous political system, which they called "*puntofijismo*". Starting in 2006, Chávez promoted the concentration of these forces into a new organization, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), which later became the hegemonic party amidst a plurality of opposition organizations that generally shared a standard social democratic orientation. On numerous occasions, this diverse opposition has made efforts to work together, as evidenced by a succession of unity schemes, including Coordinadora Democrática, Mesa de la Unidad Democrática, and Plataforma Unitaria.

Paradoxically, the contentious interaction between Chavismo and the opposition for more than two decades has led to an increasingly stable polarized pluralism. Chavismo's autocratic nature has imposed strict discipline within the PSUV, where top leaders handpick candidates for each election. Meanwhile, the unity mechanism has operated like a cartel, where political offerings are restricted to citizens and are subject to inter-party negotiations within opposition coalitions.

This system evolved so that while Chavismo preserves the republic's presidency at any cost (as a guarantee of regime

continuity), sub-national elections allow for a distribution of positions between both poles and generate incentives for a relative stabilization of the system. However, the disastrous results in terms of public policies, primarily resulting from Chavismo's autocratic and predatory exercise of state power, but also from the widespread perception that the opposition has become incapable of changing this situation, have led citizens' confidence in this system to decline to historic lows.

This brings us to the second factor: *The emergence of an individual, alternative, and unconventional leadership for this system, embodied by María Corina Machado*. With a distinct proposal, an essentially liberal vision doctrinally, and an attitude contrary to stabilizing the status quo, Machado's political offer has finally resonated with the country at a time when a clear majority of citizens reject socialism and opt for someone who unequivocally works towards a radically different system.

The contrast her leadership represents is further heightened by her being a woman and a mother. This circumstance is not insignificant in a political system like Venezuela's, riddled with obstacles when it comes to paving the way for female leadership, yet operating within a mainly matrifocal society. It is hard to conceive a more contrasting leadership or image to a militaristic and autocratic regime. The dimensions of this phenomenon became evident in the primaries of October 22, 2023, where 93% of the nearly three million voters overwhelmingly favored Machado's candidacy, even knowing that the regime led by Nicolás Maduro had decided to prevent her from competing in the 2024 presidential elections.

Beyond the period this phenomenon may remain relevant, it reflects Venezuelans' rejection of a party system that currently falls far short of their expectations. Part of the discredit of the system is due to the opposition's continuous harassment by the Chavista-Madurista regime, which dismantles the most frontal organizations while advancing to tame some and co-opt others. Consequently, the probability of a profound change in the system being led by the most visible political sectors during the last 25 years seems to diminish. The stage seems set for citizens to embrace something different massively.

In this context, the emergence of strong leadership, clearly associated with an individual and a groundbreaking discourse, offers new perspectives for a potential change in presidential elections. Machado's disqualification has not prevented voter intention from leaning overwhelmingly in her favor, with figures around the 80-20 ratio. Instead, it has enhanced it. It's a clear sign that the Chavista-Madurista model is exhausted, even though it still holds on by force, and that the possibility of change will depend on the opposition leadership's ability to articulate this massive popular rejection of the autocratic regime.

As of the time of writing this article, neither Machado's candidacy nor her representative, Dr. Corina Yoris, have materialized during the nomination proceedings before the National Electoral Congress. This was prevented by the autocratic regime itself, which instead offered the option to a series of candidates with whom it has shown varying degrees of ease in understanding. It's impossible to predict what will happen from now on. Still, it is worth noting that both the

enormous rejection experienced by the current regime and the presence of a clear and outspoken leadership that has deeply rooted itself among Venezuelans constitute clear obstacles to the consummation of fraud. Many dictatorships have fallen after attempting these types of maneuvers.

c. The end of the oil century and the necessary rediscovery of the value of freedom

It is then worth asking whether the possibility of change emerging in this electoral juncture of 2024 is due to fortuitous or passing factors or whether it comes from widespread learning within Venezuelan society. Indeed, it is still too early to assert something conclusively, as events are still unfolding. However, at this stage, it is already possible to point out several revealing facts that must be presented from a historical perspective to be aware of the change we may face.

Our society has been profoundly shaped by what we could term "the Venezuelan oil century". To understand this, it is necessary to note that the Venezuelan territory's unity is not, by any means, a natural tendency from a geographical, social, cultural, or political standpoint. During the 16th and 17th centuries, the western part of present-day Venezuela was more closely related to Colombia than the rest of the territory, which for a long time was much more linked to the Caribbean islands.

The territorial unity of Venezuela was conceived late, in the second half of the 18th century, with the establishment of the Captaincy General in 1777. However, that conception was quickly endangered for over a century, starting from the wars that fractured the Spanish monarchy in the early 19th century

until the consolidation of Andean hegemony in the early 20th century. These wars ruined the foundations of an agrarian economy, interrupted natural population growth, and resulted in a considerable decline in the population.

Fortunately, the territory of that former captaincy did not fracture into several countries, as happened with the Captaincy General of Guatemala. Venezuela managed to survive as a disjointed territory, extremely vulnerable to the appetites of foreign powers, until a succession of Andean rulers knew how to use the sudden oil windfall to lay the foundations of a true state capable of exercising legitimate monopoly of violence throughout the national territory. And as is often the case in the early stages of state formation, it did so authoritatively, prioritizing order over democracy.

Thus, the Venezuelan oil century, which began under the auspices of an authoritarian regime, would later experience a democratic explosion that effectively put oil revenue at the service of the majority. Beyond its imperfections, Venezuelan democracy in the second half of the 20th century laid the groundwork for social mobility rarely seen in the region and worldwide. However, as multiple authors have explained (Baloyra, Martz, Rey, Karl, etc.), the stability of democracy was contingent upon the effectiveness of revenue distribution. Loyalty to the system was inherently precarious, as revealed during the events between 1989 and 1999.

The so-called Bolivarian Revolution came to power promising to restore an ideal that had been consolidated during democracy but was perceived as betrayed by society: that of a

popular government in favor of the majority, where this prevalent condition would be reflected in less corruption and more effective transfers from the state to society. The state was, after all, assumed to be the engine of the economy and the distributor of oil revenue in a country rich in resources. During the early years of the "revolution," this ideal seemed to be fulfilled: the harassment of dissent was seen as a sign of combating corruption, while the irresponsible squandering of resources through an extensive clientelistic network was interpreted as progress.

However, time caught up with us. The destruction of the national productive sector, both public and private, is now more evident than ever. The currency has been pulverized. Institutions are no longer serving democracy. And through the most traumatic means, society has been losing hope that the state can be the engine of national development. After 25 years of continued plunder, the public bureaucracy is now seen as a gigantic extortion machinery, an unfathomable and dangerous network that the average citizen avoids contact with as much as possible. We moved from a "magical state" (*Estado mágico*) to the "racket state" (*Estado matraca*).

The dimensions of this disillusionment are immeasurable. Once again embraced by the man who took up arms, Venezuela is once more acquainted with the rigors of deceit, mistreatment, plunder, and abandonment. From those dreams of the "beautiful revolution," from that delirium of a "powerful Venezuela," only the bitter taste of a long nightmare remains, the infinite anguish generated by that totalitarian fiction from which the Chavista regime offers no escape. Hence,

Venezuelans once again feel the most pressing of needs, the deepest thirst one can experience, which is none other than the thirst for freedom born from a solid self-love.

If, against all odds, a minority and persecuted religion like Christianity managed to become the official creed of the Roman Empire, it was not because it promised buckets of water or bags of food. If the religion of forgiveness and brotherhood succeeded in imposing itself over the hierarchies of law and arms, it was precisely because it offered hope to the most hopeless, because it opened the door to intangible goods for those most deprived of tangible ones, and because it instilled in the humblest the profound sense of their human dignity. The Venezuelan, as a culturally Catholic people, carries in their blood a sense of personal dignity that is the foundation of all love for freedom. It is a feeling that needs to be appealed to through truthful words to relinquish the totalitarian nightmare.

At the same time, in a more pragmatic sense and by those paradoxes of life, with the introduction of the dollar into the national economy, common sense has been sneaking in through the back door. Unlike those who earn in American dollars, Venezuelans who earn in bolivars experience the proper relationship between effort and benefit, just as those who work abroad and send remittances. Thus, a minimum sense of personal independence is regained, a certain motivation for achievement from which a complete understanding of what the market truly means emerges as a place where demand and supply come together to reach mutually beneficial agreements.

From the statist impulse, the plundering frenzy, the socialist paroxysm, it seems that nothing but a renewed love for personal, political, and economic freedom is emerging. Few slogans are cheered more vigorously at the rallies organized by María Corina throughout the country than the promise to end socialism, which has become synonymous with oppression and disgrace. Even the employees of Chavista unions long for health insurance policies; even the most socialist of our revolutionaries prefer a private clinic for their family or avoid public schools for their children. Paradoxically, when the statist impulse destroys the state, private effort emerges as an unavoidable pillar of national recovery. It's no longer a matter of preferences but correspondence with the truth.

Thus, the model of the oversized and inefficient state, born from the absolute public control of oil revenue, ends. The undeniable virtues that characterized it for a time were crushed by the exacerbation of its worst inherent tendencies. Today, even the possibility of reviving a sort of welfare state depends on a prior reconstruction of public institutions and on the liberation of the productive forces of a society tightly gripped by the prevailing totalitarian dynamics.

There is an urgent need for a wholly different model of state-society relations, where Venezuelans' spirit of free association and entrepreneurship, supported by an effective rule of law, stands as the valid driver of national economic activity. The vast majority of Venezuelans have grasped this from the common sense and clarity that adversity fosters, unlike those who still have the means to negotiate the widening of their cages within the current chaotic framework.

d. The 2024 juncture: A Turning Point?

Dictatorships in our time organize elections; there is no doubt about it in the world's reality. What they do not allow is for people to choose. They use multiple mechanisms to prevent the citizens' will from being expressed. However, electoral situations are not always comfortable for autocratic regimes. Perhaps they are relatively easy situations for authoritarian leaders who enjoy significant popular support because some do. But they remain uncomfortable episodes for those facing massive citizen rejection.

We won't dedicate these lines to quoting dozens of authors who analyze how elections can trigger political transitions despite all the obstacles imposed by autocracies. We'll only assert that this possibility doesn't arise automatically simply by voting; it requires the convergence of multiple factors. Elections in which only the autocrat and his cronies participate, devoid of any will for change and lacking any challenge to the system, only serve to stabilize it.

Elections in autocracies can only catalyse political change when they are seen as an opportunity to articulate and express a massive rejection of the autocratic regime. This entails enormous efforts in communication, mobilization, and organization, under adverse conditions and multiple risks. In this sense, unity among the forces advocating for change is crucial, but I emphasize: *those advocating for change*. The worst outcome in these circumstances is when those seeking change must carry political actors within their movement who, in practice, are betting on the stability of the autocratic system.

Those who control a system of this nature are not willing to allow its dismantling if change represents persecution or imprisonment for them. If I use a metaphor, this works more or less like a tube of toothpaste: the pressure applied to make its contents come out must be accompanied by the opening of the cap; otherwise, it's difficult for the matter to work. Likewise, things will tend to remain as they are without any pressure. That's why it's necessary to identify the interests of the main political actors involved, as only some of those who theoretically oppose the system necessarily perceive themselves as net losers within it. Those who see possibilities for survival and development within the autocratic ecosystem only have a few incentives to bear the costs inherent in its modification but promote its consolidation and strengthening voluntarily or involuntarily.

Regime changes in politics usually don't occur when there is only minimal strategic and operational unity among those genuinely seeking change, which hinders the social sector from organizing. Clear leadership, a general crisis within the system, and the loss of confidence by the power groups maintaining the system are also typically necessary. In this sense, concerning the current Venezuelan case, Machado's leadership significantly contributes, in the eyes of the citizenry, to focus on a course of action that collective leadership often fails to provide.

Likewise, the Chavista-Madurista regime seems to have lost all possibility by this point to offer a viable model to Venezuelans. After squandering the greatest oil boom in our history, the country is more bankrupt than ever. None of the current regime's public policy initiatives are aimed at the

development of the population; instead, they are focused on exerting tight control over it, which is how people perceive it. On the other hand, the lack of results and the systematic use of lies have caused the political leadership of the PSUV to lose all credibility among the population, from whom they are separated by high walls, thick armor, and legions of bodyguards.

In short, no survey fails to reveal the enormous rejection generated by this political regime among Venezuelans. Even several of its international allies, those who still have some respect for democratic norms, have publicly expressed their disagreements with the fraudulent handling of the electoral process. The massive preferences for a profound and urgent change are evident. Indeed, none of this guarantees change, but let's take the inverse exercise for a moment: if the regime were to collapse today, as happened with the Soviet Union at the time, tomorrow, the prophets of the past would swarm, those who explain in hindsight why that fall was inevitable and could be seen coming. And not without reason, because indeed, the system's decomposition signs are already quite noticeable at this point.

Finally, remember that dictatorships rarely fade away through perfectly predictable and institutional channels. When this happens, autocracies usually prioritize order, while the continuity of the Chavista regime is based on disorder. More often than not, autocracies fall through a succession of errors and unexpected events that emerge when the external and internal pressure experienced by their leaders, combined with the emergence of exit mechanisms, leads to their collapse in a

somewhat surprising way. In this sense, as long as the factors mentioned in previous paragraphs are combined, elections can trigger change even when they become blatant fraud. This was the case, for example, in Venezuela in 1957-1958, Panama in 1989, Peru in 2000, and Bolivia in 2019. Time, in any case, will always have the final word.