

# Voting under dictatorship

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*“En dictadura no se vota”* (a phrase conveying there is no voting under dictatorships) is a common slogan, almost like a dictum, ever since the early years of the 21st century in Venezuela –a phrase that fails to explicitly offer alternative action. The reality is very different: it has been historically proven that one can vote without choosing in dictatorships and that electoral processes can have detonating or terminal effects on the established dictatorial order. That debate is not the focus of this article, although the writer is not neutral on the matter; we will discuss this more than once throughout the text and –no doubt about it– we will provide key elements to put it under scrutiny. Understandably, it is difficult to maintain a certain distance from our pressing daily lives when it is precisely what we need to do to address the challenges they bring our way more effectively.

I find it more appropriate to ask ourselves why do dictatorships hold elections? We can find at least six answers: the constitution imposes them, they are unavoidable, they are simulations, dictatorships have the confidence that they will win them, a complex process has led them there, or they are actually over their endeavors but want to do it in an orderly manner. We will review each one in more detail. Now, we come across what lawyers call a preliminary issue: we need a clear notion of what a dictatorship is, considering there are quite diverse phenomena thus called.

## What is a dictatorship?

There is a popular idea that dictatorship is perhaps a “necessary” or unnecessary evil. Obviously, it cannot be a good thing since it needs justification, because no one, or almost no one, wants to be called a dictator, and because it is often conceived as a temporary situation.

A *de facto* regime is far from comfortable. Sooner or later, there will be efforts to formalize this “new order.”<sup>1</sup> Paradoxically, the very democracy criticized by dictatorial speech holds prestige as a source of legitimacy. Therefore, in the attempts of a dictatorial regime to gain legitimacy, elections may be one of the ingredients it resorts to. However, in such regimes, voting is perceived as legitimizing rather than deciding, which are not the same. The legitimizing vote is not decisive; dictatorships do not place their faith in it. Their essential rationality relies on other values for which the vanguard, leader, party, army, or movement claims to know more and better than citizens. They claim their freedom “for their own good” in exchange for security, justice, order, progress, future, or another priority, except that there will always be plenty of excuses to not give it back.

The Marxists called theirs “popular democracies”; Francoism was defined as an “organic democracy”. Castro labeled the multi-party system “*Pluriporquería*”, meaning multi-filth). It’s worth remembering an analyst’s response when asked about

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1 “New State” was the formula adopted by the 48-year-long Portuguese dictatorship, headed by Professor Antonio de Oliveira Salazar, an original thinker with a nationalist and illiberal reading of his country’s history. See Felipe Ribeiro de Meneses: *Salazar, A Political Biography*. Enigma Books. New York, 2009.

the difference between democracy and socialist democracy<sup>2</sup>: he likened it to the distinction between a regular chair and an electric chair.

Whether votes in dictatorships are truly decisive rather than just legitimizing depends on a range of factors, almost all of them beyond the control of the dictatorial will. The coherent and consistent strategy of those who promote political change will of course also be key.

The word “dictator” originates from the Latin *dictator-dictatoris*. In ancient Rome, it referred to an extraordinary magistracy, with broad, supreme and time-limited powers, authorized by the Senate. The right of exception was emerging. Dictatorship, just as the decadent Roman republic experienced with Sulla and Caesar, tends to pervert or deviate from its original intent<sup>3</sup>. Not all dictatorships are the same. It begins with authoritarianism that abuses power without regard for constitutional limits, goes through those so-called “traditional” dictatorships often found in Latin America and Africa, and culminates in totalitarianism, claiming absolute control over all aspects of society, extending beyond political power. They are not a reaction to disorder; they aim to rebel against the foundations of one order to impose a new one based on other principles.<sup>4</sup> From that perspective, freedom is no longer a value. The notion of “total State” can be traced back to Mussolinian fascism. In Marxism, the “hegemony of the bourgeoisie” is replaced with the “dictatorship of the proletariat.”

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2 Single-party “Socialist Democracy” is not the same as democratic socialism or social democracy.

3 See Jesús María Casal: *Dictadura Constitucional y Libertades Públicas*. Editorial Jurídica Venezolana. Caracas, 1993.

4 See Ramón Guillermo Avelo: *El Dictador, Anatomía de la Tiranía*. Primera edición. LibrosXMarcados. Caracas, 2008.

The *Duce* proclaims that he assumes only “the political, moral, and historical responsibility” for all,<sup>5</sup> but fascism entails a totalitarian notion of politics as an integral experience and continuous revolution, to realize, through the totalitarian State, the fusion of the individual and the masses.<sup>6</sup> That individual dissolved in the collective is not radically different from the “new man” ideal found in Marxist-Leninist inspired socialist systems. Similarly, this “total State” does not fundamentally differ from the one rigorously coordinated by the single party to which every public power organ was subordinated according to the doctrinal dictates of Lenin,<sup>7</sup> not Stalin, whose bloody tyranny is excess, never deviation.

That original dictator whom Churchill describes as “the monstrous son of pressing circumstances”, by becoming a long-lasting dictatorship-ideological project, is equivalent to “preparing a new cataclysm”<sup>8</sup> which, as shown throughout history, often descends into madness.

Drawing from genetic taxonomy terminology, we can categorize authoritarian systems into various orders, families, genera, and species that are more or less tyrannical depending on their degree of corruption.<sup>9</sup> Among them we can find that spawn of relative novelty although with ancestry in the aforementioned varieties, called by Hurtado “dictatorships of the 21st century”. These regimes have come to power through elections under a constitutional framework that guarantees rights and opportunities,

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5 Benito Mussolini: *Me ne frego*. A cura de David Bidussa. Chiarelettere. Milano, 2019.

6 Emilio Gentile: *Fascismo. Historia e Interpretaciones*. Alianza. Madrid, 2004.

7 Robert Service: *Lenin, una biografía*. Siglo XXI. Madrid, 2010.

8 Winston Churchill: *Grandes Contemporáneos*. Plaza & Janés. Barcelona, 1974.

9 See Eduardo Haro Tecglen: *Diccionario Político*. Planeta. Barcelona, 1995.

as if the citizen vote were enough to correct arbitrariness, legitimize authoritarianism, convert unconstitutional acts into constitutional ones, and qualify undemocratic institutions as democratic.<sup>10</sup> Examples of such regimes can be found to different degrees in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua. The region has seen a precedent of impressive durability and sophistication in the so-called “perfect dictatorship” of the PRI hegemony in Mexico, originally conceived as a constitutionalized revolution, which has served as a rich source of material for cinema, literature, and politics.

At the start of the 19th century, Alfieri observed that tyranny exists when those responsible for enforcing laws can create, destroy, violate, interpret, obstruct, suspend, or simply evade them with the certainty of impunity.<sup>11</sup>

### **Why do dictatorships hold elections?**

Elections are often held in dictatorships albeit under a façade where the very foundations of their power deny pluralism, despise “bourgeois freedoms”, and therefore do not acknowledge the intrinsically mutable criteria of majority and minority.

Let’s delve into the different motivations behind this, where we can find everything from affinities to contrasts and even contradictions. This multiplicity of colors are not just solid or distinct shades; it is rather a palette than enables various combinations and nuances.

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10 Osvaldo Hurtado: *Dictaduras del Siglo XXI. El caso ecuatoriano*. Paradiso Editores. Quito, 2012.

11 Víctor Alfieri: *De la Tiranía*. Fundación Manuel García-Pelayo. Caracas, 2006.

Electoral means have certainly been a favorable path, despite bumps and the constant risk of reversibility, in the difficult task of advancing toward the conquest of democracy. Crises within the power structure itself that have contributed more frequently than economic or social crises, although there are notable cases such as the collapse of the Indonesian economy in 1997-1998 or the massive protests in the Philippines after the assassination of Benigno Aquino in 1983, with a decisive impact on the end of the Suharto and Marcos regimes respectively. After all, as a social science, political science is not an exact science. This is both its challenge and its source of infinite possibilities.

But why is this the case?

1. *Because they are imposed by the constitution*

Traditional Latin American dictatorships, illustrated by Valle-Inclán in his novel *Tirano Banderas*, tend to prefer avoiding radical ruptures of the constitutional order. Governing shamelessly and blatantly contradicts the foundational values of the nations.

Venezuelan positivist thinkers, whose most relevant spokesperson was Vallenilla Lanz in his classic *Cesarismo Democrático*,<sup>12</sup> theoretically resolved the issue by speaking of a “paper constitution”, formally consecrated according to an imported model, and another “organic” or effective one, rooted in a national historical and social reality that demands a “strong man.” Oropeza<sup>13</sup> answers by describing “inauthentic constitutions” as those that

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12 See Ramón Guillermo Aveledo: *Instituciones Políticas y Constitucionales. Guía básica y de lecturas*. Instituto de Estudios Parlamentarios Fermín Toro-AB Ediciones UCAB. Caracas, 2021

13 Ambrosio Oropeza: *La Nueva Constitución Venezolana*. 1961. Italgráfica. Caracas, 1971.

disguise authoritarian power as legitimate. Dictatorships fear openly contradicting “the foundations, doctrine, and objectives” that inspired the struggle for independence. The true dictatorial constitution is camouflaged behind a written constitution that apparently abides to these principles but really subverts them through calculated interpretations and accommodations.<sup>14</sup> That theory and those practices, as history has repeatedly shown, have been and continue to be instructive, regardless of ideological underpinnings.

The Venezuelan Constitution of 1953 was “inauthentic”, and did not dare to break with the democratic conquests of the Venezuelan people, linked to powerful values. It established a five-year limit for the presidential term, which trapped the dictatorship within its own legal framework. Transgressing it with a hasty plebiscite law to avoid the planned election inflamed the internal crisis within the Armed Forces and hastened its downfall.

Chilean militarism suffered a similar fate when it held and lost the 1988 plebiscite that would lead to another in 1989, this time agreed upon with the united opposition and its replacement by the elected government of Patricio Aylwin that would spearhead the transition to democracy.

In Mexico and Brazil, the transition to democracy had its unique characteristics, with formal provisions that did not necessarily align with the essence of the existing political system.

In Mexico, the 1917 constitution established “effective suffrage and no reelection.” The regime that emerged from the Mexican Revolution ensured the consistent and stable alternation

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<sup>14</sup> Oropeza: cited opus.

of presidents and other positions, through a combination of legal devices, power practices, and extralegal maneuvers that guaranteed it occurred without affecting PRI's monopoly for seventy years. The constitution imposed some rules until "the spell was broken" and the "velvet revolution" towards democracy began.<sup>15</sup>

In Brazil, militarism installed in 1964 through "Institutional Acts" suspended the validity of the election, as well as the popular election of the President. During those two decades, the occasional alternation in the exercise of power fell to the Armed Forces. Starting in 1967, a constitution that respected traditional formalities came into effect, with a bipartisan system decreed to the ruling party's advantage. Every four years the Congress elected a military President, except for the initial three-year phase of Marshal Castelo Branco and the brief interregnum of civilian Aleixo and the Provisional Military Junta<sup>16</sup> between September and October of 1969 following the death of General Costa e Silva, until, within the framework of the same rule of law, President Figueiredo liberalized the system, and civilians elected Tancredo Neves and Vice President José Sarney, who replaced him due to his death before taking office.

## 2. *Because they are unavoidable*

When an elite in power aims to remain there using revolutionary arguments, the unpredictability that is inherent to politics as well as life appears, and sometimes they cannot avoid submitting to true elections that potentially end their rule.

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15 See Miguel Angel Juárez: *Revolución de Terciopelo... en el principio era el caos. El nacimiento de la democracia en México*. Resistencia. México, 1998.

16 Composed of General Lira Tavares, Admiral Rademaker and the Marshal Márcio de Sousa Melo.

There are numerous factors that have been studied: the quality of political leadership, cultural or regional differences such as nationalism, secularism, or local specificities in various countries; the actions of religious institutions with prestige and broad social implementation such as the Catholic Church in the Philippines, Chile or Poland or the Protestant churches in the former German Democratic Republic; or international efforts to promote democracy, influential in the wave of Latin American democratizations of the last decades of the 20th century or the collapse and dismemberment of the Soviet Union and its influence on the nations of Central and Eastern Europe<sup>17</sup>.

Nicaragua is an emblematic case, where the triumphant Sandinista revolution in 1979, following the collapse of the National Reconstruction Board and the election of Daniel Ortega with an overwhelming majority of nearly seven out of ten votes, marked the beginning of a process aimed at consolidating power through a party-state project. This process also involved the establishment of a new politicized military structure, a noticeable increase in the persecution of political opponents, including those who had previously been dissidents or openly opposed the ousted Somocismo regime, and economic policies with catastrophic results.

The previous efforts of the Andean Group governments in 1979 for a political solution that would end the dictatorship had failed. The US Carter administration and several Latin American democratic leaders underestimated the risk, and opted for a strategy aimed at “taming” the revolutionaries.

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17 See *Democratic Transitions. Conversations with World Leaders* (Sergio Bittar & Abraham F. Lowenthal. Editors) John Hopkins University Press. Baltimore, 2015.

The crisis soon became infectious. Those that had participated in the armed rebellion against the Somoza dynasty, displaced sectors, and Nicaraguans dissatisfied with the course adopted by the revolutionary government presided over by Ortega, gathered to form the “Contra” guerrilla, with support from Reagan’s administration in the United States

Furthermore, the political, economic, and social situation became increasingly unsustainable ten years after the revolution. The international efforts of former President Carter, OAS Secretary Baena Soares, and Elliot Richardson, American Republican statesman and representative of the UN Secretary-General, resulted in a peace agreement with consensual elections in a climate that clearly favored an official victory according to polls. However, the opposition of fourteen parties under the banner of UNO and its candidate Violeta Barrios de Chamorro secured a significant victory with 54.74% of votes. The results were accepted by Ortega and the FSLN.

### *3. Because they are simulations*

Certain dictatorships hold calculated electoral events exclusively aimed at creating an appearance of popular support, in order to legitimize or reinforce its course.

As soon as they overcome the stage of destroying the “old order”, they can leave behind the phases of mere fact or coexistence with a persecuted opposition with reduced spaces to conduct electoral simulations where only government platforms participate.

The recent Cuban National Assembly of People’s Power elections on March 26, 2023, illustrates this. The 470 seats were

chosen from a single list of equal numbers of nominees, all by the Communist Party or the territorial and social organizations under its control. 72.10% voted for the complete list and 27.90% used selective voting, resulting in an overwhelmingly positive vote of 90.28%.

Not too different from the election in fascist Italy in March 1934 for the 400 seats in the Chamber of Deputies. In that election, voters were given a binary choice of YES or NO to the single list presented by the National Fascist Council, which received an overwhelmingly high 99.85% of the vote.

In the People's Republic of China, the National People's Congress is made up of deputies elected in the provinces, autonomous regions, municipalities and the Army, but the same constitutional framework establishes that it is the supreme organ of the State **under the leadership of the Communist Party of China**. In the "popular democracies" of real European socialism, it was always more or less like this. And in the Spanish Cortes of the Franco regime, only a third of the attorneys were elected by the male heads of the family, the rest obeyed a corporate representation of official origin.

#### 4. *Because they have confidence that they will win*

The first to be deceived by misleading propaganda are the propagandists. They are the ones that buy into this narrative. It provides them with a sense of comfort and reassurance. The Venezuelan military dictatorship called elections for the Constituent Assembly in 1952, convinced that it would win. After all, no one had come out to defend the government deposed in 1948 on the streets; it had restored order, outlawed the most important political party as well as another minor but highly organized

one, and restricted the freedoms of the two that were able to participate. Yet they lost, as Pinochet lost the 1988 plebiscite by a landslide, despite fifteen years of dictatorship after the chaotic collapse of Chilean democracy, the restrictions imposed on the divided political opposition, and several attempts to come up with a successful economic policy that bred inequality.

In the 1990 Nicaraguan election, we observed elements of categories 2 and 5, but it cannot be ignored that except for one, Venezuelan Gustavo Méndez's Doxa, all other polls indicated that Sandinismo would win, so it is logical to include here as well.

5. *Because a complex process has led them there*

National, international dynamics, or both can influence the political processes that lead to an electoral outcome. Pressures can come from outside whose real effect will depend on regime vulnerability. Organized internal presence by well-directed opponents, accompanied by effective international activism and taking advantage of opportunities, as narrow as they may be, are likely to strengthen negotiation processes. South Africa is a great example of this.

In Mexico, the split of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI, *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*) brought leaders who were familiar with the inner workings of the system to the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD, *Partido de la Revolución Democrática*). This event, along with the disputed election of Salinas de Gortari, his government of changes dotted with scandals, the appearance of the "Zapatista" guerrilla, the murder of the young reformist Luis Donaldo Colosio and, although different, that of former Guerrero governor Ruiz Massieu, the loss of the PRI majority in Deputies, enabled the clearly reformist

management of Zedillo, the last PRI ruler of those seven decades. He pursued legal reforms and changes in the electoral institutions that allowed the National Action Party (PAN, Partido Acción Nacional) opposition and its candidate, Vicente Fox, to win the elections.

Upon the death of Franco in Spain, and once his successor Arias Navarro was replaced by Adolfo Suárez, from within the regime, not without more serious tensions, reforms started giving legal character to what was already normal on the streets in that most modern country far from the Civil War; and the Spanish transition took place, led between 1976 and 1981 by him and the Union of the Democratic Centre (UCD, Unión de Centro Democrático), the party he formed and then, from 1982 and for fourteen years, led by Felipe González and the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE, Partido Socialista Obrero Español).

*6. Because, in fact, they are done (and want to leave in an orderly manner)*

There are several cases of dictatorial regimes of quite different character that actively and deliberately participated in the orderly culmination of its rule. They knew that they were already unsustainable and chose to hold elections in which the vote would decide, although securing, through negotiation, a set of guarantees whose actual sustainability would be variable.

In the midst of systemic crises that do not enable the continuation of the status quo, political actors often conclude that a way out must be found and an opening route, even agreed upon, is encouraged. They are not linear nor instantaneous processes, although certain events can accelerate them.

Such is the case of the military regime in Brazil. In the Argentine military dictatorship, the defeat in the Falklands War in 1982 brought the palace coup against General Galtieri, the replacement of his comrades-in-arms Videla and Viola, and with the assumption of General Bignone, the call for elections in 1983. In them, the Radical Civic Union (UCR, *Unión Cívica Radical*) candidate Raúl Alfonsín emerged triumphant.

South Africa was not a typical dictatorship, but apartheid certainly involved the undemocratic reality of the white *Afrikaner* minority ruling to the exclusion of the overwhelming black population. Democracy came as a byproduct of negotiation.<sup>18</sup>

Even in communist regimes, as seen in Poland, democratic transitions can occur. The military chief Jaruzelsky, head of the PZPR Party-State, would have the role of determining influence. Nineteen years of repression, setbacks, complaints, the visit of John Paul II, elapsed from the union protests in 1970 to the Round Table agreements in 1989, in which the government and the opposition agreed on an electoral process with obvious advantages for the latter but beyond formal data, it was overwhelmed by reality. Poland is today a democracy, it participates in the European Union and NATO.

This case and that of Brazil bring to light the role of the Armed Forces in democratic transitions.

Kwasniewski, the most prominent civilian political figure of Poland's transition, stated the importance of the military. When

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18 See Steven Friedman: *Democracy as By-Product, South Africa Negotiated Transition in Democratic Transitions. Conversations with World Leaders* (Sergio Bittar & Abraham F. Lowenthal. Editors) John Hopkins University Press. Baltimore, 2015.

the regime weakens ideologically and economically, the relative power of the armed and security forces grows. The military is a “positive, pro-state” organization that feels responsible for the country’s future and security. From the opposite side, Mazowiecki, the democratic Prime Minister in that period, agrees with the military influence and in turn highlights that of the Communist Party in the Armed Forces. In the first phase, the same ministers of the area continued to participate in the government, and policies and commands were progressively changed. The process was hard and took time.<sup>19</sup>

In Brazil, Cardoso believes the military was reasonable. Achieving civilian control of the Armed Forces after twenty years in which they were the real power was a major political issue. The good relations in the military world of Sarney, the first indirectly elected transitional civilian President, were helpful although progress was gradual. During Cardoso’s presidency, he agreed with the military to reunite the four existing Ministry of Defense of the Navy, Aviation, Army, and General Staff into a single Ministry of Defense. Overcoming resistance to this change, a symbol of the new political system in Brazil, required a realistic and progressive approach that combined determination with political flexibility.<sup>20</sup>

Among us Latin Americans, the case of Chile is well known. It was marked by a constitutional reform agreed upon after the plebiscite favorable to NO that imposed a period of cohabitation with the command of the Armed Forces, including Pinochet. Aylwin recalls that the attitude of that institution, inevitably displaced by change, was “a true unknown.” There was a lot of mutual distrust. The outgoing dictator made threatening warnings

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19 See interviews in *Democratic Transitions. Conversations...* (Bittar & Lowenthal)  
Cited opus.

20 See interview in *ibidem*.

between the election and the inauguration. On the political right, which had a strong parliamentary presence, there was fear of potential “dismantling of the institutions”. Meanwhile, sectors of the anti-dictatorial opposition to the left of the Concertación coalition simply “did not believe in the electoral route” and censored any perceived “weakness”. From day one, the new President emphasized the importance of seeking common ground and the purpose of “making power an instrument to unite and not to divide.” The climate of trust and respect among Chileans that was to be reestablished would be among all “civilians or military,” which he firmly reiterated because “Chile is only one!” Politeness does not take away courage, he explained later; the transition to a democratic government was done in “a peaceful manner and without major traumas,” avoiding temptations such as settling scores.<sup>21</sup>

What Foxley states holds true for this one, for other successful cases discussed here, and for any transition process marked by its complexities that the key lies, mainly and fundamentally, in the quality of policymaking.<sup>22</sup> That is the essence of competent service in favor of the common good that politics must have, leading with generosity and vision.

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21 Patricio Aylwin: *El reencuentro de los demócratas. De la dictadura a la democracia*. Fondo de Cultura Económica Chile. Santiago de Chile, 2018.

22 Alejandro Foxley: *Economía Política de la Transición*. Dolmen. Santiago de Chile, 1993.