

Elías Pino Iturrieta: On July 28th “we delivered a resounding defeat to Maduro’s movement, paving the way for hope”

Democratization

The professor and member of the National Academy of History affirms that “no episode from Venezuela’s past can be compared with what we are experiencing today.” Rather than seeking formulas applied in earlier times, the intellectual recommends “building on what we have devised through this exercise of resistance” until change is achieved.

–To begin with, I would like your assessment now that a year has passed since the presidential elections of July 28, 2024.

On July 28, the people made a forceful and undeniable decision: the end of Maduro’s regime and the restoration of a democratic process long absent in Venezuela. The voters did not call for a transition, but for the disappearance of the Chavista administration and everything it has represented for society. It was a clear, definitive expression, backed by millions of voters who crushed the few supporters of continuity

I am not sure that those same voters now feel they should keep their heads down, waiting for new opportunities. I think they are still on the lookout for a new chance, but without the emphasis of the past, without the clarity they had on the eve of the vote. Since the regime reacted in terrible ways to cling to power, it has provoked a generalized and understandable caution among a society that rejects it, but that must preserve both the projects for change and life itself in the face of the danger of a disappearance that could be long and painful.

Nothing like this had ever happened before in Venezuelan politics, and hence the need to think about paths forward that are arduous, but that must also be as unprecedented as the situation democracy is undergoing.

–Perhaps one of the hardest things about this moment is this feeling of emptiness, of uncertainty. The electoral path was taken to achieve change, and it did not succeed. Now there is a call not to vote in order to keep alive the claim regarding the July 28 results. The page is not turned, but time does go on. How can a new roadmap be designed in this context?

The second issue is a consequence of the first, as you say, but it is only what has been proposed as a nearby possibility, as an outlet in the face of urgency, but perhaps only as a kind of automatic reaction.

There is a shift suggested from action to passivity, or from dynamism to lack of movement, which is not without meaning when one considers how inaction itself can be an eloquent response to the brutality of those in power, or as a way of surviving while awaiting better times without exhausting one's strength.

However, idleness leads, or can lead, to exhaustion. Inaction is the puzzle that neither the interviewer nor the interviewee can solve, but rather those who are higher up and more committed, more obligated, like María Corina Machado and the members of her vanguard. But, as things stand today, the page is not turned; unfortunately, the same sheet keeps being read without anything of significance being added to the text.

I know it is very difficult, with the henchmen breathing down your neck and in the midst of pervasive terror, to set about writing wonders, but the writing cannot be paralyzed.

—In moments like this, more than a few voices suggest “reviewing” or “learning” from history to confront the challenges of the present. What episode from Venezuela’s past might be useful to analyze in order to approach this reality?

No episode from Venezuela’s past can be compared with what we are experiencing today. None. Nothing even remotely similar. That is why the past cannot serve as a ready-made guide for us, and why the answers we seek and need are so difficult to find in the midst of unprecedented uncertainty.

With the political parties that functioned up until the rise of the lieutenant colonel now languishing, with the ideas that nourished them consigned to the cemetery, with most of the newer parties having nothing to offer, with most of the opposition leaders marginalized from society or bought off cheaply by the autocracy, the result is a desolate landscape that the old chronicles never recorded.

But it is not only a painful matter; it is also a promising one, because it shows how, in the midst of such barrenness, we

lifted our heads as a society and delivered a resounding defeat to Maduro's movement, paving the way for hope as never before. From there must come an outcome as auspicious as the result of July 28.

–Chavismo has already been in power for a quarter of a century, and its civilian-military leadership constantly reiterates that theirs is a historical project, one that comes to complete the independence struggle initiated by the heroes of the homeland, of whom they claim to be direct heirs. Twenty-five years later, how can the Chavista project be defined within the framework of our history?

Chavismo is historical in only one regard: a single, momentous fact that most of our analysts and observers have failed to grasp –the total annihilation of the Republic founded by Venezuelans in 1830.

This is of the utmost importance: the burial of Venezuelan life as it was conceived from its origins, the death of public institutions and the codes of conduct built over time, the overwhelming of legality rooted in liberal principles, the imposition of a new everyday life, and even the reshaping of collective memories regarding what is public and what is private. That is what is historical –or rather, anti-historical– about Chavismo.

But it is also the failure of Venezuelan politicians and intellectuals, with honorable and rare exceptions, who have not even perceived the slightest trace of the destructive monster. Chavismo is the negation of the Republic built by our ancestors and by ourselves, of a valued republicanism turned to rags. That is Chavismo.

—Maduro proposes —without offering further details to date— a reform of the Constitution to —he says— strengthen communal power. Will this be the birth of the Sixth Republic?

There is no Sixth Republic, because there was no Fourth or Third. There has only been one Republic, originating with the Colombian secession, which the Chavistas have carried to the grave. The historical significance of María Corina Machado's leadership and that of her team lies in their proposal to return from the liberal path, or the liberalism that has been the essence of national deliberation since Venezuela's founding. If a convincing explanation of that leadership was needed, I offer this one to you.

A new Constitution matters little, insofar as it does not represent anything truly novel in the intentional process of destroying republicanism that has been underway since the rise of the lieutenant colonel. One more step toward the abyss —but we were not surprised by the next step. It was predictable, though we neither acknowledged it nor joined in its chorus.

—When people talk about a transition for Venezuela, academics and commentators cite the cases of Chile, Poland, Spain, and South Africa, among others. Why is it that the Venezuelan case of January 23, 1958, is so rarely mentioned? Could it be because such a rupture is considered impossible?

January 23, 1958, took place after the burial of the deceased general. The “deceased” of our present day, however, is alive and kicking —far from the grave. The enemies of the deceased back then were not only young and vigorous, but also enjoyed overwhelming popular support. Today, we do not even have a program for funerary rites. The current reality is so unprecedented that it cannot rely on references to past political examples; instead,

it depends on following what we have invented in an exercise of resistance unlike anything in our history, yet for that very reason, full of enigmas and unpredictable.

—On one hand, it is said that Venezuela will not become another Cuba because it carries a democratic experience that works in its favor. But on the other hand, it is noted that those forty years of civil democracy were just a parenthesis in a history marked by militarism and authoritarianism. Who has more deeply embedded elements in the Venezuelan DNA to win this struggle: the brief democratic memory or the long authoritarian tradition?

Regarding the DNA, I can only tell you that it exists and can be verified in what we have done against the lieutenant colonel and his successor. First, we learned to survive, and then we have gradually cornered him, forcing him to commit an unprecedented electoral fraud and to abandon any restraint in the realms of torture, humiliation, forced disappearances, and the violation of human rights. And we accomplished this on the fly, without classroom instructors or ready-made models. Perhaps only with the inspiration of María Corina Machado. Without headaches or state-of-the-art tricks, any city laboratory could confirm the existence of that DNA. But we can guarantee its existence up to today —because tomorrow will be another day.