

Paola Bautista de Alemán

# Order First, Democracy Later: Notes on the Venezuelan Transition

## Introduction

The departure of Nicolás Maduro from power on January 3 opened an unprecedented political process in Venezuela, one deeply conditioned by external intervention and by the persistence of the authoritarian architecture. Far from constituting an automatic transition toward democracy, this moment initiated a complex, provisional roadmap filled with tensions.

The design announced by U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio proposes a three-stage path —stabilization, recovery, and democratic transition— which should not be understood as sealed compartments nor as a mechanical sequence, but rather as interdependent phases whose development conditions the viability of the whole.

Rubio has been explicit in noting that the immediate priority following the January 3 operation was to “avoid chaos and guarantee minimum conditions of governability,” even if that required difficult short-term decisions. That statement, reiterated both in public remarks and in his testimony before the United States Senate, reveals the conceptual framework guiding the U.S. strategy: first order, then openness; first control, then politics.

This essay examines those three stages from a central premise: democracy is not a byproduct of order or economic growth, but rather a political construction that requires action, deliberation, and organized citizen pressure. Based on this conviction, it is argued that each phase of Rubio's itinerary contains authoritarian risks, but also opportunities that Venezuelans must actively contest in order to transform a process guided by force into a legitimate and sustainable transition.

### **Cross-Cutting Features of Rubio's Itinerary**

Before examining each of the stages of Secretary Marco Rubio's proposed plan, it is worth pausing to consider the general features that permeate the process as a whole. Beyond the specific details of stabilization, recovery, and democratic transition, the design exhibits structural characteristics that condition its development and delimit the room for maneuver of Venezuelan actors. In light of what has occurred during the first weeks following the January 3 operation, at least four cross-cutting features can be identified.

*The first* is the centrality of U.S. political will. The process is inaugurated through an external use of force, successful in military terms, but still lacking domestic legal and constitutional anchoring. This absence of institutional grounding generates a double effect. On the one hand, it accelerates decision-making and allows rapid progress in specific areas; on the other hand, it introduces a high degree of political uncertainty. Tutelage has been effective in producing compliance, but it does not yet provide the structural stability demanded by other political and economic actors, particularly those interested in long-term commitments.

*The second feature* is the serious democratic deficit running through the process. The dominant logic remains one of coercion. The incentives that have modified the behavior of authoritarian

power have not been political or deliberative, but fundamentally punitive, both in their actual use and in their latent threat. This explains why the United States has resorted to implementing reforms through institutions inherited from the dictatorship, limiting changes so far to the economic sphere.

This dynamic, opaque and pragmatic, lacks defined timelines and verifiable democratizing signals for citizens. By design, Venezuelan participation remains contained and subordinated to a notion of order that privileges authoritarian predictability over the uncertainty inherent in democratic opening.

The *third feature* is the provisional nature of the process. Far from following a fixed script, the roadmap is being built as it progresses, based on general guidelines that adapt to the inputs of the moment. This flexibility should not be interpreted as improvisation.

Comparative experience shows that rigidly planned transitions often fail in volatile contexts. The capacity for adjustment is, in this sense, a strength of the design. At the same time, this provisionality opens spaces for political contestation: the course of the process is not predetermined and allows for intervention.

Finally, the *fourth feature* is the interdependent relationship between the stages. The phases do not follow one another in a linear manner nor do they respond to a strict teleological logic. The development of each stage conditions the viability of the others. Stabilization affects the possibilities for recovery; recovery affects the conditions for transition.

This simultaneity prevents a comfortable sequential reading, but it opens a meaningful field of action: in each phase, the outcomes of the others are anticipated. It is in this critical space that

the voice of Venezuelans can –and must– make itself heard. The central political responsibility consists of promoting a dynamic in which the interdependent relationship of the stages does not lead to stagnation, but rather to progressive advancement toward democracy.

### **I. Stabilization: Between Order and the Risk of Autocratic Rebalancing**

The first phase of the plan –stabilization– has the declared objective of preventing chaos and ensuring basic economic stability, particularly to ensure the continued functioning of the so-called oil quarantine.

It is a period of control, of still undefined duration, in which the United States has chosen to rely on the remaining institutional structures of the former regime, now headed by Delcy Rodríguez. From this emerges an asymmetrical tutelage arrangement: Washington instructs, and the authoritarian apparatus executes.

This sequence –order before politics– is not unprecedented in comparative processes of political change. In Eastern Europe, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, countries such as Poland and Czechoslovakia managed to combine institutional containment with an accelerated break from the old regime. In other cases –such as Romania, Bulgaria, or Ukraine in the 1990s– prolonged control and elite continuity resulted in captured transitions and fragile democracies.

The Venezuelan case is particularly delicate because the external tutor is not operating over reformed institutions, but rather over an intact authoritarian architecture. This heightens the risk of autocratic rebalancing: a dictatorship that, once

economically stabilized and made functional to external interests, manages to politically recycle itself.

The case of Iraq after 2003 offers an illustrative counterexample. The abrupt dissolution of the state and political opening without prior order generated a power vacuum that led to violence, fragmentation, and a loss of legitimacy in the democratic process. Washington appears to have learned from that experience and has prioritized containment. However, the inverse lesson is also relevant: excessive control, without a clear roadmap toward openness, can produce stability without sovereignty and order without democracy.

For that reason, Venezuelan stabilization will be politically defensible only if it is explicitly oriented toward the creation of pre-democratic conditions. The opening of civic space, the release of political prisoners, and the initiation of institutional reforms should not be understood as premature concessions, but as mechanisms to prevent order from becoming an end in itself.

## **II. Recovery: From Economic Reconstruction to Reinstitutionalization**

In his statements following January 3, Rubio has insisted that stabilization must give way to a phase of accelerated economic recovery, aimed at reactivating the oil industry and generating incentives for international investment. The logic is clear: without material recovery, any political transition would lack a sustainable foundation.

Comparative history partially supports this argument. In Central and Eastern Europe, countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Estonia, and Slovenia managed to combine economic reforms with simultaneous processes of democratic

reinstitutionalization. There, liberalization advanced alongside the rule of law, political competitiveness, and effective checks on power.

By contrast, experiences such as Russia, Ukraine in the 1990s, Bulgaria, and Romania show that when economic opening precedes institutional construction, the outcomes tend to be oligarchization, state capture, or authoritarian regression.

In the Venezuelan case, recovery should not rest exclusively on institutions inherited from the dictatorship –the National Assembly, the Supreme Court of Justice, and the Comptroller General’s Office– which lack credibility and transparency. Their decisions may be functional in the short term, but they do not offer guarantees of stability or durability. For that reason, the reinstitutionalization of the state should not be treated as a subsequent phase, but as a constitutive component of recovery itself.

This point connects with a central concern of international actors. Without the rule of law, there is no legal certainty; without legal certainty, there is no sustainable investment. In this sense, comprehensive recovery becomes a potential space of convergence between the demands of the international economic order and domestic democratic aspirations.

The progressive reduction of the democratic deficit –the defeat of censorship, the opening of the political system, the legalization of parties, and the expansion of freedoms– is not incompatible with recovery. On the contrary, it constitutes one of its enabling conditions. The temptation to preserve oppression in the name of stability has proven, in multiple contexts, to be a short-sighted strategy with high political costs.

The provisional nature of the process, far from being a weakness, opens a political opportunity. Building in real time allows for the active intervention of Venezuelan society to contest the meaning of recovery and to prevent it from being reduced to a mere program of economic reactivation without citizenship.

### **III. Democratic Transition: Constitution, Representation, and Participation**

During his testimony before the Senate, Rubio was particularly cautious when referring to democratic transition. He avoided presenting it as an automatic consequence of the fall of the regime and described it as a process that must be built by Venezuelans themselves once minimal political and institutional conditions are in place. That statement places the transition in the realm of collective action, not historical inertia.

The Spanish experience between 1975 and 1978 offers an essential point of reference. The transition was not the passive result of Franco's death, but rather of a complex political negotiation in which social mobilization, institutional reform, and political leadership converged to overcome the resistance of the old regime. Without organized civic pressure, the opening would have been superficial; without institutional agreements, it would have been unstable.

It is necessary, however, to introduce an essential nuance. The Venezuelan case remains far removed from the Spanish Transition scenario. The differences are neither minor nor merely circumstantial. The first is the absence, within effective power, of a reformist figure equivalent to Adolfo Suárez.

The Spanish transition benefited from an internal actor within the regime who was willing to dismantle it from within. In

Venezuela, Delcy Rodríguez does not fulfill that role: her actions respond to a logic of authoritarian survival, not to a reformist will aimed at democratizing the system.

The second difference lies in state capacity. Spain inherited from the dictatorship a functional state apparatus, with professional bureaucracies, an effective monopoly over coercion, and the capacity to implement reforms.

The current Venezuelan state, by contrast, is profoundly eroded: it lacks institutional autonomy, suffers from severe administrative deficits, and exhibits characteristics of a weak state, if not an almost failed one. This fragility severely limits the possibility of an orderly transition and heightens the risks of capture, destabilization, or prolonged tutelage.

In light of the foregoing, Venezuela's transition requires at least three interdependent dimensions.

- The first is constitutional. The roadmap demands a clear legal channel capable of incorporating the popular will in a legitimate and orderly manner. Without a constitutional framework, the transition risks devolving into a prolonged administration of the crisis.
- The second dimension is representation. The political leadership that has made it possible to reach this point, with María Corina Machado as its central figure, must be strengthened. Yet no transition can endure without political parties capable of representing, organizing, and channeling social demands. Party weakness, the result of years of persecution and fragmentation, constitutes one of the principal bottlenecks in the process.
- The third dimension is participation. Comparative experience demonstrates that transitions do not unfold in silence. Citizen mobilization –when politically guided

and strategically oriented— functions as a lever to overcome authoritarian resistance and accelerate reform. Without organized participation, Venezuela’s transition risks becoming trapped between external tutelage and internal inertia.

## Conclusion

Rubio’s plan for Venezuela reflects a realist –and deeply pragmatic– conception of political change in collapsed authoritarian contexts. The United States has privileged order, containment, and stability as prerequisites for any democratic opening, aware of the risks that premature liberalization entails in a country institutionally devastated.

However, that realism contains a tension that cannot be resolved solely from Washington. Stabilization without civic opening risks consolidating autocratic rebalancing; recovery without reinstitutionalization can produce growth without rights; a transition without constitution, representation, and participation would result in a prolonged administration of the crisis, not in a democracy.

For that reason, the success –or failure– of this process will not depend solely on the U.S. design, but on Venezuelans’ capacity to politically intervene in each phase. Stabilization must be oriented toward opening civic space; recovery toward institutional reconstruction; and transition toward the constitutional, representative, and participatory articulation of popular sovereignty.

Democracy will not arrive as an external concession nor as a byproduct of economic order. It will be the result of a conscious, sustained, and organized political struggle. That is the historic

challenge facing Venezuela today: to transform an operation of force into a legitimate transition, and a process under tutelage into a democracy of its own.