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When Force Opens the Door: Dilemmas of the Venezuelan Transition.Interview with Miguel Ángel Martínez Meucci

Miguel Ángel Martínez Meucci is Venezuelan. He was born, raised, and educated in Caracas. In 1999, when Hugo Chávez came to power, he was studying Political Science at the Central University of Venezuela.

He recognized early on the authoritarian drift of chavismo and, shortly thereafter, left for Madrid to pursue doctoral studies at the Complutense University, where he specialized in negotiation processes and conflict resolution.

After earning his Ph.D., he returned to Venezuela. He came back to a country that was beginning to grow more accustomed to saying goodbye than to welcoming people home. He joined the academic life of Simón Bolívar University, where he served as professor and coordinator of the Master's and Doctoral programs in Political Science.

Around that time, he published the book *Apaciguamiento: El Referéndum Revocatorio y la consolidación de la Revolución Bolivariana*. In its pages, he describes with particular acuity the political instrumentalization of negotiating

arenas. More than an academic text, the book functions as a manual for understanding contemporary authoritarian practices.

In 2016, he emigrated. Like so many university professors, he was forced to seek opportunities elsewhere. Chavismo hollowed out our institutions of higher education: a silent tragedy, rarely spoken of, but one that occurred.

The destruction of the country in which he was born pushed him to participate in politics. Today, he devotes much of his time to the fight for democracy, having also become a political advisor. He works together with *Vente Venezuela*, María Corina Machado, and Edmundo González, and has played a significant role in the liberation process that began with the 2023 primary election.

He speaks calmly, does not become irritated, and keeps his Caracas accent. He is careful with his words, avoids superlatives, and keeps his emphasis grounded in reality. Moderate in his manner and in his judgments, he does not see himself as a politician, even though he has been engaged in politics in recent times.

In this conversation, we delve into the removal of Nicolás Maduro, the complex process currently underway, and the future that lies ahead for Venezuela.

January 3: An Act of Force

–To begin, let's go to the essentials: what exactly happened on January 3?

It was the extraction of an individual. It was a use-of-force action that undoubtedly constitutes a turning point and opens the possibility of a transition.

–That action by the United States triggered significant international controversy.

Yes, there is enormous controversy regarding its nature as a violation of international law. But when did international law begin to be violated in Venezuela? What did international law do when the regime violated human rights and destroyed the country? On January 3, it became evident that we are in the midst of a raw and unmistakable geopolitical confrontation.

–From your perspective, how does this operation fit within U.S. foreign policy?

Within its new national security approach and its new foreign policy, the United States considers fostering change in Venezuela a key objective. It is a cornerstone for consolidating its hemispheric control. For that reason, I believe that what occurred on January 3 was not an improvised action. There was considerable planning, and all of this responds to a long-term vision.

–Part of the debate has centered on how to name and characterize what occurred. Why is that so difficult?

Part of the difficulty in characterizing what happened on January 3 lies in the very complexity of the chavista regime. The

dictatorship under chavismo is not a conventional autocracy. It is not a military autocracy. It is a regime that combines totalitarian and kleptocratic elements.

–So, are we facing a process that is exceptional even by the standards of political transitions?

January 3 and the process we are experiencing are as *sui generis* as the dictatorship they seek to depose.

Changing the Regime Without Collapsing the State

–You have pointed out that the nature of the chavista regime is particularly complex. In that reality, the deep entanglement between the regime and the State stands out. What prevents the dismantling of chavismo from resulting in even greater state weakness?

That is precisely another of the particularities of this case. For example, in Venezuela (1958), Spain (1978), and Chile (1988), there were States with relatively strong institutional capacity. In those three cases, the autocratic regime relinquished control of a State with significant institutional strength.

In the current Venezuelan case, we are dealing with state institutions that are deeply corroded, weakened, and permeated by criminal dynamics. In addition, there has been a deliberate attempt to create para-state organizations.

One piece of evidence of this is the clear differentiation between the Bolivarian National Armed Forces and the repressive structure of the para-state colectivos. The creation of the social "Missions," operating parallel to the conventional public administration system, responded to that objective.

Chavista governance —if one can call it that— generates enormous corruption within the State. For that reason, this is not a matter of merely transferring those state institutions to the democrats; it is a matter of undertaking their democratic reconstruction

–From the perspective of the United States, what is the main risk it seeks to avoid in this process?

The Trump administration's main concern is preventing chaos. In the absence of a moderate faction within Chavismo willing to open the door, they decided to apply direct pressure to create that possibility.

–When you speak of pressure, are you referring to the direct use of military force?

Yes, the use of force. This is being done under pressure. You just cooperate. Period. What was sought was someone who would open the door from the inside, to use an expression I have been employing in recent days. The United States wanted someone to open the door from within, instead of bringing the whole structure down. And Delcy Rodríguez emerged as someone willing to do so.

–An inevitable question follows after that: do you believe Delcy Rodríguez can be considered a reformer?

Delcy is carrying out the assigned task with greater or lesser willingness. She is certainly doing so incompletely, with many doubts. But she is moving. It remains to be seen how far she would be willing to go, given her past and the responsibilities that stem from it.

–If the driving force behind change is coercion and not democratic conviction, what guarantees exist that the process will truly move toward democracy?

This process of handing over the state in a relatively orderly fashion is subject to very strong, significant, and personalized external pressure. I believe that can be quite effective. Targeted pressure on the heads of the regime may succeed in compelling them to relinquish what remains.

Now, what lies ahead will not be simple. It is a gigantic challenge. I do not see it is feasible, in order to rebuild the country, to simply receive and manage what exists. The level of destruction makes it necessary to rebuild things from the ground up. And that is not easy. There is no playbook for this. What does exist, however, are very clear ideas within the democratic leadership about the new order that should be put in place

–Coming back to Delcy Rodríguez, the one who "opens the door" today: what distinguishes her from historical cases such as Adolfo Suárez or Mikhail Gorbachev?

The first difference between the Venezuelan case and the Spanish case is that Franco died in bed; no foreign force took him away. Likewise, no foreign power removed Gorbachev in a commando operation.

In both those historical cases —Suárez in Spain and Gorbachev in the Soviet Union— there was some personal reflection about the need for political reform. For that reason, both leaders directed and embraced them. They were essentially voluntary and deliberate political decisions.

In Delcy Rodríguez's case, what we have seen so far is that she opens the door from within under coercion. That is why doubts about the true degree of voluntariness of those executing the plan to dismantle the dictatorship are grounded in reality

–Are there comparable precedents to this type of process in other countries or historical moments?

There aren't many precedents for something of these characteristics. It is very particular. And it is interesting because the characteristics of the chavista regime are also very particular.

So, although at first glance reformist traits are not visible in Delcy Rodríguez, it is difficult to say they don't exist at all, or that, for example, this crisis couldn't allow reformists to emerge.

What is happening is being forced, but that does not rule out the possibility that, given time, someone could emerge who genuinely wanted reform but lacked the opportunity while Maduro was in power. I do not see that as likely at this stage, but we also do not know what will happen

–In that sense, could it be said that coercion might eventually give birth to a reformer?

In politics, nothing is impossible. For that reason, I tend to think in terms of probabilities rather than possibilities. And although it is not likely that Delcy Rodríguez is doing this *motu proprio*, pressure can produce unexpected results.

That is what transitions are about: they are processes in which people are compelled to modify their points of view, their psychological attitudes. They force all of us to recalibrate

expectations, feelings, and attitudes. In that way, coexistence is restored

–I understand the logic of coercion as a trigger, but looking at the long term: what is the limit of force as a driver of political change?

Force is the trigger. Now, if the reasons motivating the remnants of chavismo to change are reduced solely to the threat of the use of force, it will be an extremely precarious political process. Ideally, chavista actors with a genuine political will for change would emerge, but so far that remains to be seen.

–And if those actors do not appear?

Everything will be precarious. That is why the issue of timing concerns me. The Rodríguez siblings have demonstrated that they are skilled at buying time. They have been Maduro's political operators tasked with exerting pressure on social and international actors of various kinds in order to gain time.

There is an important time horizon in the case of the Trump administration. I am referring to this year's midterm elections in the United States and, afterward, the presidential elections.

Democracies do not have much time. Democrats answer to the general interest, must deliver results, and are subject to public scrutiny. But autocrats are not. Autocrats usually have time at their disposal. They entrench themselves in power and buy time.

For me, that time horizon is key. If the Trump administration does not finalize the transition —or at least secure the conditions to ensure that the transition takes place— we will enter very dangerous territory.

We could find ourselves at a moment in which that administration loses room for maneuver and the entire process is put at risk.

Alongside this real risk, I identify important opportunities. The actors involved —fundamentally President Trump and Marco Rubio— have a great deal at stake in the success of this initiative. For that reason, I think they must be considering everything necessary so that, within the course of this year, the process is "all tied-up and well tied-up."

Opening the Door from Within

So far, we have spoken about the United States and Delcy Rodríguez. I would now like to move on to analyzing the authoritarian system that lies at the center of this process.

–When people speak of "dismantling through reforms," the doubt is inevitable: can this system withstand that path without collapsing, as happened in the Soviet Union?

The Soviet Union was rigid. It was an autocratic regime that operated under parameters of the last century. Chavista autocracy exercises domination in a more fluid manner. It is not a conventional hierarchical structure.

It is, rather, a conjunction of dynamics of control and plunder that mutates continuously. In that sense, I believe that direct pressure on the regime leaders may —possibly— be an effective way to induce relatively accelerated mechanisms of change.

It is also important to understand that the economy is at play and is a relevant variable. In the Russian case, the state oil

monopolies ended up controlling the intelligence apparatus. In the Venezuelan case, it would appear that this will not be so.

The United States is controlling the two primary sources of financing for the system —oil on one hand, and drug trafficking on the other. It is a strategy aimed at undermining the system from its economic foundations and disabling its functionality. By altering the regime's political economy, the United States is forcing it to change.

–So, rather than a reform, are we facing a process of systemic dismantling aimed at paving the way for a new democratic state structure?

Yes, and it is very complex. This is not about handing over the keys to a ministry and replacing personnel. It will be a demanding process that will take time, and it seems to me that the design of the political change roadmap proposed by the United States responds to that reality.

The Voice That Preceded January 3

–I would now like to talk about Venezuelans. It seems to me that there has been a democratic deficit in the political process that began on January 3. It appears that the voice of Venezuelans is still not present, and I would like to hear your opinion on this idea.

You were speaking about the moment when the process began and the absence of a popular voice. If we are talking about the immediate circumstances of January 3, I might perhaps agree with your assessment. But I believe the picture is broader and that this path began earlier. And it began, precisely, with enormous popular protagonism.

I think it is very important to see it that way. This began with the participation of Venezuelans. It began when people found a mechanism through which their voice could truly be heard. The regime had been very skillful in ensuring that voice was not heard.

I am not referring only to censorship and fear, but also to this idea of generating a communicational fabric, a political fabric that worked to its advantage. That functional, regime-aligned opposition faction, better known as the "alacrana," has been one of the fundamental pillars of the regime's stability over an extended period.

Only when citizens found a way to organize themselves —and a leadership that said, "Let's go to elections, but only if the votes are actually counted"— did people understand and say, "Now it is worth participating."

Without this civic decision, we would not have had a January 3. The United States does not enter a country with a legitimate president. The popular and sovereign will was essential for this to occur.

That said, I must add that, after the mechanism of force, we must see the return of citizen participation, of organized political forces, of civil society, of the social fabric. Citizen participation is therefore an obligation.

Venezuela can only rise again as a consequence of the free initiative of organized citizens. Within organized civil society lies what is needed to move forward. I believe we are moving toward a reconfiguration of the State: a much smaller, leaner State.

In that sense, the program of María Corina Machado and Edmundo González seeks a subsidiary State —a State in which

everything that citizens are capable of doing, they should do, and which provides support wherever assistance is needed

> I agree with the importance of citizen participation. That's why I'd like us to talk now about political parties.
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> –Venezuela has a strong political party tradition that remains strong. More than two decades of dictatorship have not managed to make it disappear. But parties are not what they once were, and they are going through a crisis of representation. Perhaps the breathing room this process brings will help us recover... perhaps not. What role do you think political parties will play during this period?

All political systems are grounded in a political economy. In the twentieth century, Venezuela was a petrostate, and the democratic system grew closely tied to the management of oil revenues. For that reason, parties in Venezuela were born from the top down.

It worked like this: someone would come to occupy an important position within the State and would generate a structure that became a political party. But the history of political parties in other societies is the opposite: they are forms of organization that emerge from the bottom up.

So, I believe that, in some way, as the State is reconfigured, public institutions must also be reconfigured. And political parties will be compelled to reconfigure their own operating logics. We will need parties that are much more capable of articulating popular demands and less focused on managing revenue.

We are already seeing that change. It is what happened in the primary election of October 22, 2023, and in the presidential

election of July 28, 2024: movements of highly motivated people who, without being formally linked to political parties, played a fundamental role at those moments. And that speaks to civic awareness.

The party system will have to adapt to the new circumstances. The logic of distribution has come to an end because the state that made it possible no longer exists.

Anxiety and Hope: The Emotions of Transition

–It is time to close this conversation, and it is inevitable to look ahead. In light of the challenges we have identified, how do you see the future?

I see, at the same time, anxiety and hope. Anxiety, because every transition is an uncertain path between two situations of relative certainty. It is a passage from one system of rules to another, yet the process itself is defined by a lack of clear rules.

So that lack of clear rules generates anxiety and concern. That is normal. These are complex processes. Hence the need for them to be navigated with composure and with strong popular support.

I believe it is very important that every step we take opens the door to people's participation. That is what will gradually pave the way: knowing that whatever happens is supported by the people.

It cannot be a negotiation among small groups. There cannot be an agreement reached behind the country's back. People must be included so that this has legitimacy, grounding, and deep roots.

I believe that is something we cannot lose sight of. People felt they won on July 28. Venezuelans organized, took risks, worked in an almost clandestine manner, and it worked.

That experience of victory through popular organization is something we cannot forget or pretend did not happen. For me, the transition began at that moment, not with Maduro's extraction.

For that reason, hope comes accompanied by anxiety, but it is also sustained by the path already traveled. Everything we have achieved is very important and is a reason for hope.

Citizens' sense of self-worth is fundamental. It is the awareness that Venezuelans want something different. We set this process in motion so that it could happen, and we are the ones who will bring it to completion

–In the future you describe, there will have to be a reckoning with what we have lived through. What have these years of suffering and democratic struggle left us? What have we learned?

All these very hard years have generated deep personal and collective traumas that will have to be addressed, but they have also sown an attitude that I value greatly: a wisdom born of the harshest experience; a learning process, a renewed appreciation for freedom, solidarity, order, integrity, truth, responsibility, and the courage to defend all of the above.

We have come to know and feel, in our own skin, that these things are not secondary or ornamental, but the very core of any society that truly seeks to prosper. That is why I find it admirable to see young people who have never lived under democracy, yet are working to achieve it and still dream of freedom.

–So, could we say that we have a great opportunity ahead of us?

Yes. We have an extraordinary opportunity to change the model of the State. We will be able to make it functional, small, agile, and strong. It can be tremendously efficient, highly effective, and a model at the global level. If we do not set these challenges for ourselves in this way, then the tragedy will remain only a tragedy.

Tragedy cannot be meaningless suffering; it must become the source of learning and improvement. We must find meaning in what we have lived through. And that meaning is being able to say, with maturity: "This has made us better; this makes us stronger."

From now on, I believe we will be in a position to value much more what truly matters, and we will have a great opportunity to do things very well.