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from Regularization
to Uncertainty
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Introduction

This new edition of *Democratization* is published at a turning point in contemporary history —not only for Venezuela, but for the entire hemisphere. We are witnessing an authoritarian advance that can no longer be explained solely through ideologies or traditional struggles for power. What we face today is a tide that combines political control with criminal economies, where drug trafficking has become one of the pillars sustaining new models of domination.

Organized crime no longer operates only from the shadows. In several countries in the region, it has managed to infiltrate institutions that were created to guarantee peace, order, and the rule of law, transforming them into tools of instability and control. Ministries, security forces, justice systems, and party structures have been penetrated by networks that do not seek to represent citizens, but to protect illicit businesses and ensure impunity.

We must be clear: drug trafficking is not a new phenomenon in Latin American politics. However, what we face today is different from the visible and violent cartels of the 1980s and 1990s. Those criminal structures have evolved. The figure of the narco is no longer that of an external financier who bought influence from outside the system, but rather an actor who is part of the

state apparatus or conditions it from within. Its objective is no longer only immediate profit, but ensuring its survival through the systematic weakening of democracy.

In the pages of this edition, we analyze how this narco-politics has contributed to the dismantling of freedoms in Venezuela and in other countries in the region. We also examine the human impact of this model: economic crises used as mechanisms of social control, the expansion of informal economies linked to criminal networks, and a massive exodus that is not a historical accident, but the direct consequence of environments dominated by violence, impunity, and the absence of guarantees.

To understand this puzzle, we present seven research articles that address the most urgent issues on our agenda: migration driven by violence, the influence of drug trafficking on strategic political decisions, the deterioration of justice systems, and the personal and collective cost of engaging in politics in authoritarian contexts. This edition seeks to provide analytical and reflective tools to grasp the magnitude of the challenge facing the region if it aims to recover strong institutions, public trust, and democratic stability.

Samuel Díaz Pulgar

Exile: The Constant Grief

After just over a year abroad, I am only now beginning to feel at peace saying it out loud: I am in exile. And even so, I am still learning how to process it. It is not a milestone that one overcomes overnight, but a constant process that breathes with me, that moves forward and backward depending on the weeks, the memories, and the new challenges I have to face.

I did not say it before because, honestly, I did not know how to organize it within myself. Moreover, in my case, I left with many advantages: friends who welcomed me, cities that opened their doors, jobs that allowed me to grow and maintain a stable life. I have had important opportunities, and I am aware of that privilege.

But none of that changes a simple truth: exile is hard, even when you are accompanied, even when things are going well. Because it was not a decision made out of liking or pleasure, but out of necessity.

On January 8, I felt that everything changed. When I was once again accused of being a terrorist —something that had already happened in 2017, but this time felt different, definitive— I unders-

tood that I could not remain in Venezuela. That day marked a before and after, even if I did not say it publicly.

And that is where one of the first realities of exile begins: the initial shock. This mixes with another truth that does not change, no matter how grateful you are: it never feels like home.

No matter how well you are treated, how much you adapt, or how comfortable you are, nothing compares to home. And there is not a single day that goes by without you thinking —even if just for a second— about returning.

Meanwhile, life for everyone else goes on. In the first months, many people check in on you, but later everyone moves on with their own lives. And you have to do the same. In that process, without realizing it, you begin to put up barriers: to avoid worrying your parents, to avoid repeating the same story over and over, to protect yourself while you try to understand what you are going through.

I remember that during my first three months, I cried many nights. Not because of what I was experiencing abroad, but because of what it meant to have left. It was coming to terms with the fact that I could no longer return home whenever I wanted; that I could no longer “steal” Tupperware from my mom with the excuse of being an only child; that I could no longer go to the stadium with my dad, or eat empanadas, or go down to the beach, or go out partying with my friends.

And among those core memories that exile takes away from you, there are two that weigh on me especially.

The first: not being there with my dad when he threw the first pitch at the game between Tiburones and Águilas. That was a moment I had dreamed of keeping forever, and I missed it.

And the second: not being able to be with my mom when her best friend passed away, because I knew I would have been a source of support for her at that moment.

That day I understood something that is hard to accept: exile is not only carried by the one who leaves; it is also suffered by those who stay. My absence was not only mine; it was also hers, my family's, the life we left behind.

These are memories that hurt in a place you did not know you had.

As the days go by, another part of exile begins to reveal itself: the confrontation with yourself. With your decisions, your doubts, your demons.

You begin to think about all the paths you could have taken, all the versions of your life that might have existed. You enter the multiverses of what might have happened if you had done or said something differently. That wears you down. That weighs on you. That exhausts you.

It is confronting guilt, regret, and questions that have no answers. It is carrying the doubt of whether you could have avoided something, of whether your life would look different today. These are moments in which the emotional weight feels greater than yourself.

And to all of this is added something fundamental about exile: you have to reinvent yourself. Not from a motivational cliché, but

from a real stripping away. Because even if one says that a position, a role, a title, or a political space does not define you, they really are part of your identity. In exile, you are forced to let go of that previous version of yourself. You have to release the image others had of you —and even the one you had built for yourself.

It becomes a labyrinth of questions: Who am I now? What do I want? How do I redirect my purpose in the midst of so much adversity?

Reinventing yourself externally is difficult; reinventing yourself internally is even harder.

And all of this happens while you discover another uncomfortable truth: you do not start from zero —you begin at a deficit.

You do not have your network of contacts, you do not have anyone to reach out to, no one to recommend you. You do not have the social capital that once felt natural in your country. Growing professionally abroad is like climbing a steep slope with empty hands.

And when you think you have seen it all, something quieter appears: survivor's guilt.

That inexplicable feeling of discomfort for being happy, for enjoying a moment, for having a good day. You ask yourself, "Why me?" while others you care about remain there.

And then comes the judgment:

- those inside say that it is easier to speak from abroad;
- and some outside say that you should no longer have a voice because you do not live there anymore.

All of this adds weight to the grief and the daily burden.

In the midst of everything, there is also my mother's voice: "Maybe we raised you too well?"

She said it from love, from pride, from concern. But it still shakes you. Because it reminds you that your decisions do not only affect you —they also affect those who stay behind, those who experience their own grief as they watch you leave.

Added to that weight is a fear shared by all exiles: that something might happen to your parents and you will not be able to be there. It does not paralyze you, but it is always present.

Then comes the practical side.

How do you regularize your status? How do you obtain documents? How do you get hired? How do you prove your value in a place where no one knows you? And as an immigrant —and sometimes undocumented— you often have to prove three times over:

- that you are worth hiring despite your age;
- that you are worth hiring despite your nationality;
- and that your greatest enemy is not yourself: not allowing fear, noise, or the pain of what you left behind to consume you.

Because no matter how much Venezuela hurts, you have to learn to live despite what is happening there. And, at the same time, accept that no one will fully understand what you are going through. Everyone has their own urgencies, rhythms, and priorities. And no one will give you a formal space to "grieve," because you still have to produce, work, and adapt.

All of this happens while you try to share —even if only a little— your process, without making “the exile” your sole identity.

I write all of this because, in the end, we write to make sense of the noise inside. To give language to what we feel. To understand ourselves a little more. And because, when we dare to tell our story, we open a door for others to dare as well.

Today I can say that I am doing well. That I have grown, that I have reinvented myself, that I keep moving forward. And I can also say that I am still learning how to process it.

Exile is not easy, but it does teach something fundamental: even far away, even with everything it carries, life goes on.

And so do you.

And if you are reading this and have lived through something similar —if exile took a life away from you, if a relationship ended because of uncertainty, if you miss your loved ones, if you dream of embracing those who are not there— I want to tell you something simple: you are not alone.

I hope this virtual embrace, however small, makes your grief just a little more bearable today.

Juan Miguel Matheus

Pablo Escobar's Dream¹

Maduro achieved what Escobar could not: turning a country into a narco-state.

In 1982, Pablo Escobar was elected as an alternate representative to Colombia's Congress and dreamed of reaching the presidency to shield his cocaine empire with political power. But he did not succeed. Democratic institutions, despite the violence and corruption he unleashed, held firm. Democracy prevailed.

Four decades later, that aspiration materialized in Venezuela: Nicolás Maduro has achieved what Escobar could not, merging state power and organized crime into a single structure. He is a capo-dictator...

The recent designation by U.S. authorities of Maduro as the head of the Cartel of the Suns confirms an alarming reality: Venezuela is not suffering from a traditional autocracy, but rather a narco-state. Drug trafficking routes, money laundering, and the protection of international criminal networks are not parallel businesses to power —they are its essence. Generals, ministers,

1 Published in La Gran Aldea on August 15, 2025, <https://lga.lagranaldea.com/2025/08/15/el-sueno-de-pablo-escobar/>

diplomats, and intelligence officials operate as components of this machinery, controlling ports, airports, and borders to guarantee the flow of cocaine and other illicit goods. This is why the United States has raised the reward for his capture to 50 million dollars –one of the highest ever offered for a criminal, even surpassing that once offered for Osama bin Laden.

The reach of this criminal structure extends beyond Venezuela's borders. The operations of the Cartel of the Suns feed criminal networks in Europe, Central America, and North America, increasing violence, political corruption, and money laundering. The murder in Chile of former lieutenant Ronald Ojeda –allegedly ordered, according to investigations, by high-ranking figures within the regime– demonstrates the capacity of this apparatus to carry out politically motivated violent actions beyond national territory.

At the same time, alliances with authoritarian regimes such as Russia reinforce Maduro's criminal power. Caracas has become Moscow's most important enclave in Latin America, with military and intelligence presence that protects and projects the regime's influence. This relationship turns the fight against Venezuela's narco-state into a matter of hemispheric and global security.

Thus, the Venezuelan experience compels a rethinking of democratic transition strategies. Dismantling a narco-state is not the same as opening the path toward democracy after a conventional dictatorship. It requires creativity and innovation to confront transnational actors with high capacity for violence and corruption. The priority, in a potential "day after," will be to restore to the state the legitimate monopoly of force, to purge and subordinate the armed forces to civilian authority, and to regain sovereign control over the national territory. Without this step,

any political or economic reform aimed at democratizing the country will be doomed to fail.

But the task is not limited to institutional reconstruction. The narco-state has left deep cultural scars: it has normalized corruption, violence, and impunity as pathways for social advancement. A process of moral and civic regeneration will be essential to form citizens aware of their responsibility in defending the common good. Without this cultural shift, democracy will remain permanently vulnerable.

Ultimately, the Venezuelan case serves as a warning to the world: when organized crime captures a state, its threat expands globally. For this reason, the democratic struggle in Venezuela is not only ours; it is part of a global battle for liberal democracy. Defeating Maduro's gangster-style autocracy will be a victory for all who believe that democracy cannot coexist with organized crime.

María Paula León Linares

Human Mobility from Venezuela: from Regularization to Uncertainty

Since 2010, Latin America has experienced considerable changes in migration flows directly linked to the complex humanitarian crisis affecting Venezuela. In 2025, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) identified Venezuela as the country with the largest number of refugees in the world. Approximately 7.9 million people have left the country. Of these, about 6.71 million are living somewhere in the region, with Colombia, Peru, the United States, and Brazil hosting the largest numbers of migrants from Venezuela.

Within the framework of *Cartagena +40* –an event held in Santiago, Chile, in 2024 to commemorate the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees– the Chile Declaration and Plan of Action (2024–2034) was adopted. This ten-year roadmap aims to address current challenges related to forced displacement, including the Venezuelan exodus, by incorporating best practices and the participation of numerous countries across the region. However, this instrument is not legally binding, meaning that governments may incorporate the agreements reached on a voluntary basis.

Although in the early stages of the exodus triggered by the crisis the countries of the region responded in a way that

could be described as supportive, the sustained increase in migration and the development of various electoral processes –especially presidential elections– have revealed a gap between the commitments assumed in multilateral forums and the way migration is actually managed within each country.

1. The Era of Regularization in the Region

A few years ago, the landscape was substantially different from what is observed today. Institutional efforts were primarily focused on migration regularization, rather than on adopting restrictive or punitive measures.

During the early stages of the crisis, most countries in the region relaxed visa requirements or implemented extraordinary regularization mechanisms, recognizing the difficulties faced by Venezuelan nationals in meeting the standard requirements of visa regimes.

In this context, several temporary regularization policies were promoted across the continent, such as the Temporary Stay Permit Card (CPP) in Peru, the VIRTE visa in Ecuador, and the Temporary Stay Permit (PTP) in Panama. Also noteworthy are the Temporary Protection Statute for Venezuelan Migrants (ETPV) implemented in Colombia, as well as mechanisms introduced in the United States, including Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and Humanitarian Parole.

The ETPV in Colombia is a protection mechanism complementary to the asylum system, developed under the government of President Iván Duque (2018–2022). This instrument received international recognition for its temporary nature and for its goal of facilitating migrants' transition into the ordinary visa system

within a period of up to ten years, with the possibility of later obtaining residency and naturalization.

The ETPV is composed of two main components: the Single Registry of Venezuelan Migrants (RUMV), which functions as a system for the identification and characterization of the migrant population, and the Temporary Protection Permit (PPT), which serves as an official identification document.

To date, approximately 2.1 million people have been approved for the PPT, and around 1.9 million already possess the physical document. However, the deadline to apply for the PPT expired at the end of 2023, with only a few limited exceptions remaining.

In the case of the United States, according to data from the Department of Homeland Security, approximately 117,000 Venezuelans benefited from the Humanitarian Parole program. This program grants temporary permission to remain in the country and allows the admission of foreign nationals for urgent humanitarian reasons or significant public benefit, even when they do not meet the ordinary visa requirements, according to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). Additionally, approximately 600,000 Venezuelans have received Temporary Protected Status (TPS) since 2021.

The cases of Brazil and Argentina are somewhat exceptional in the region. Brazil, in particular, implemented Operation Welcome (*Operação Acolhida*), a humanitarian initiative launched by the federal government in 2018 to receive and assist migrants and refugees –primarily Venezuelans– entering the country. This policy is implemented in coordination with United Nations agencies and civil society organizations, with the objective of providing protection and promoting the socioeconomic integration of this population.

Brazil also allows Venezuelans to apply for a two-year temporary residence permit, which is renewable and can lead to permanent residency, even in cases of irregular entry, and it accepts expired identity documents. Currently, it is estimated that more than 80 percent of the Venezuelan population in Brazil holds regular migration status.

As for Argentina, the country has a long migration tradition that has facilitated more open regularization policies than those of many other countries in the region. In this context, Argentina had already expanded the possibility for Venezuelan citizens to apply for temporary residence that can later transition into permanent residence, with more flexible requirements than those applied in other countries.

However, due to geographical distance and the economic crisis of recent years, the South American country had not been the primary destination for many Venezuelan migrants. In the current context, this is beginning to change.

2. The Increase in Migration and Political Changes

For several years, Venezuela has experienced a combination of political, economic, and social conditions that indicate the country is going through a complex humanitarian crisis, severely affecting all aspects of life and different sectors of society. Among the main factors shaping this situation are the collapse of public services, shortages of basic goods, macroeconomic disruptions —such as hyperinflation— forced migration, systematic human rights violations, rising insecurity, and profound institutional weakening.

According to the report *Social Deprivation Gaps in the Complex Humanitarian Crisis in Venezuela* published by HumVenezuela¹, stable access to drinking water constitutes the most urgent need, followed by the lack of quality health services and persistent failures in electricity provision. The report notes that the multi-dimensional nature of the crisis means that affected individuals face multiple deprivations simultaneously, which tend to reinforce one another. While some indicators of quality of life have shown a sustained deterioration for more than two decades, the growing movement of Venezuelan citizens to other countries in recent years demonstrates a clear intensification of the crisis.

An examination of the flows of people who have crossed the Darién Gap irregularly over the last decade reveals a sustained and accelerated increase beginning in 2020. While approximately 8,500 people crossed in 2020, the number exceeded 130,000 in 2021, rose to more than 248,000 in 2022, and reached its highest level in 2023, when nearly 520,000 people crossed the Darién Gap in an attempt to reach the southern border of the United States.

As the number of people experiencing human mobility in the region increased, presidential campaigns and public policy approaches toward migrant reception began to undergo significant transformations. One of the most visible cases was that of the United States, particularly during the presidential campaign of Donald Trump, in which the need to restrict migration was repeatedly emphasized. However, electoral processes throughout the region revealed that this rhetorical and political shift was not an isolated phenomenon, but rather a broader and increasingly widespread trend.

1 HumVenezuela, *Brechas de privación social en la crisis humanitaria compleja en Venezuela*, Junio 2025.

With the election of new presidents in Panama, Peru, Ecuador, and more recently Chile, it became evident not only that migration was instrumentalized as a campaign issue – often linked to security concerns– but also that integration and regularization processes remain unstable, as they depend largely on the political will of the sitting president.

In this context, the Humanitarian Parole program is no longer in effect, and nearly 170,000 people have been deported from the United States, of whom more than 4,000 are Venezuelan nationals. Likewise, most of the special permits and relaxed migration requirements previously implemented across the region to facilitate the integration of Venezuelan citizens are no longer in effect.

This situation is not limited to governments with right-wing political orientations. In Colombia, for example, during the presidency of Gustavo Petro, migration policy has not occupied a central place in the government’s agenda. Although the previous administration succeeded in advancing protection for nearly two million people, six months before the end of the current presidential term no comprehensive policy has been formulated to address individuals who entered the country after the ETPV application deadline expired.

3. Changing Narratives: The Criminalization of Migration

Adding to the uncertain landscape surrounding the regularization and integration of Venezuelan migrants in the region is a growing narrative of stigmatization and criminalization across the continent. The shift in U.S. migration policies has generated greater pressure on Latin American countries, intensifying internal tensions and leading several governments to adopt more restrictive measures. In this context, Peru, Ecuador, and Chile have recently announced the militarization of certain border

areas to strengthen controls over the entry of migrants into their territories.

Over the past year, statements by public officials and political leaders have frequently linked migration –particularly from Venezuela– to rising security concerns. One example was the statement made by Peru’s Minister of Foreign Trade and Tourism, Úrsula León, who defended the declaration of a state of emergency in Lima in March 2025 as a measure to contain rising crime, attributing it primarily to Venezuelan criminals who had migrated in recent years.

In this context, several crimes committed in South America have been associated with *Tren de Aragua*, a Venezuelan-origin criminal organization that now operates in multiple countries across the subcontinent.

It is true that the region faces numerous challenges, including security problems linked to transnational organized crime. However, this phenomenon predates the Venezuelan exodus and cannot be explained solely by recent migration flows. Nevertheless, for many governments across the continent, it is politically easier to attribute the current complex situation to groups of foreign nationals who have arrived in recent years. This criminalization of migrant populations not only fuels fear and xenophobia in host societies, but also creates social barriers that hinder integration processes.

4. An Uncertain Future

Based on the analysis presented above, it can be concluded that responses to migration resulting from Venezuela’s complex humanitarian crisis –even in countries with more developed migration policy frameworks– have largely been government

responses rather than state policies. This situation generates instability in the integration processes of people in situations of human mobility and contributes to increasing their vulnerability.

Although there are voluntary repatriation programs and some people have chosen to return to their country of origin, the truth is that living conditions in Venezuela have not experienced substantial improvements nor show clear signs of change in the short term. This suggests that outward migration flows from the country will likely continue in the near future.

The criminalization of migration increases pressure on migrants—particularly those in an irregular situation—and does not contribute to the construction of sustainable long-term responses that benefit both host countries and populations in situations of human mobility. In contrast, greater regional coordination oriented toward regularization could allow for a more effective response to a problem with clear transnational effects. Available evidence has shown that a well-managed and organized migration approach generates economic, social, and cultural benefits for receiving societies. In this sense, regularized Venezuelan migration, as has already occurred in other contexts, can become a driver of development for host societies. The question, then, is whether it is possible to return to an approach of solidarity and welcome in the current regional political context.

Walter Molina Galdi

The Cost of Doing Politics in Venezuela

Explaining Venezuela during the dark era of Chavismo is certainly a challenge. Not because there are few elements, but because there are too many. We can speak of the complex humanitarian emergency, designed from within power and used as a tool of social control. We can speak of the largest forced migration in the contemporary world that is not the consequence of a conventional war or a large-scale natural disaster, but of a deliberate policy of impoverishment. We can speak of the systematic electoral frauds, with that of July 28, 2024 being the most crude, obscene, and decisive. We can speak of the corruption that has stripped Venezuelans of hundreds of billions of dollars while filling the pockets of small groups both inside the country and abroad. We can speak of the symbiosis between the tyranny that has hijacked our territory, organized crime, drug trafficking, international terrorism, and other allied autocracies. We can –and must– speak of the crimes against humanity investigated by the International Criminal Court and of state terrorism, as defined by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

All of that is necessary. But this time, I wish to focus on something else: on the concrete, everyday, and human cost of doing politics in Venezuela. On what it means to decide to dedicate one's life to the defense of human rights in a country where violating

them is state policy. On what it means to practice journalism when freedom of speech is considered a threat. On what it means to analyze, write, investigate, or think critically when knowledge itself is seen as an enemy. Ultimately, on what it costs—in terms of security, family, freedom, and life—to oppose the most terrible barbarity in our history.

A Tyranny without Euphemisms

Venezuela is not living under a “hybrid authoritarian regime,” nor under an “illiberal democracy,” nor under an “imperfect dictatorship.” Much less, of course, is it living under a democratic model “with problems.” Venezuela is facing a tyranny, plain and simple, without euphemisms. And not just any tyranny, but a narco-terrorist tyranny, one that combines the classic vices of despotism with the typical logistics of mafias and terrorist groups.

This is key from both a narrative and even an academic standpoint. Unlike the bureaucratic-military dictatorships of the twentieth century, Chavismo evolved into a model in which power is sustained not only through state coercion, but also through transnational criminal networks, illicit economies, irregular armed groups, and alliances with global authoritarian actors. In this context, thinking is dangerous. Thinking differently is subversive. And expressing it publicly effectively becomes a crime.

Doing politics in Venezuela —or even being close to it— is not about competing over ideas within an institutional framework; it is about surviving within a hostile ecosystem designed to persecute, threaten, and destroy all dissent.

Activism as a Crime

Imagining political activism in Venezuela requires setting aside the traditional categories of comparative political science. It is not only about persecuted national leaders. It is about a thorough form of persecution that reaches down to the very last link of the social organization.

Engaging in politics entails risk from the highest to the most basic level: from those who lead a candidacy to those who organize a neighborhood meeting in a parish, in a residential area, on a street, or in any community. From those who denounce in international forums to those who distribute flyers or mobilize voters. From those who use academia as a space for critical thinking to those who write on social media. The regime understands that democratic politics is not defeated merely by imprisoning visible leaders, but by breaking the organizational fabric. By instilling fear. By forcing silence.

After the electoral fraud of July 28, 2024, that logic intensified. According to journalistic investigations¹, at least 408 activists, leaders, journalists, and human rights defenders were forced into hiding or had to leave the country urgently after that date. This is not about planned exile, but about flight: without farewells, without guarantees, without a clear return. And, in addition, with the fear of what may happen to their families, as we are speaking of a regime that practices *Sippenhaft* —that Nazi practice of kidnapping relatives of dissidents to pressure them.

1 <https://storage.googleapis.com/qurium/armando.info/de-la- clandestinidad-al-exilio-el-trayecto-urgente-de-cientos-de-venezolanos-despues-del-28j.html>

In many cases, the first step was not exile, but clandestinity: borrowed houses, phones turned off, total isolation, minimal communication, escape routes evaluated in silence. Politics thus becomes a parallel life, marked by paranoia, anxiety, and the total loss of normality.

Repression as Public Policy

The data confirm that this is not a case of isolated abuses, but of a systematic state policy. According to the NGO *Foro Penal*, at the time of writing this article there are 893 political prisoners in Venezuela (174 military personnel, 119 women, and four teenagers). According to the NGO *Justicia, Encuentro y Perdón*, the figure rises to 1,081 people kidnapped by Chavismo, including twelve human rights defenders and twenty trade unionists. The number varies from week to week, but the pattern is stable: arbitrary detentions, temporary enforced disappearances, torture, cruel treatment, and precautionary measures that function as prolonged punishments.

Among these prisoners are prominent figures such as Javier Tarazona, director of *Fundaredes*, detained for documenting the presence of irregular armed groups and human rights violations in border areas, and Rocío San Miguel, president of *Control Ciudadano*, detained by the state for analyzing and denouncing the militarization of power and corruption within the Armed Forces. In both cases, the “crime” was exercising the right to investigate, inform, and warn.

The concept of “freedom” is emptied of meaning when thousands of people live under mandatory court appearances, travel bans, constant surveillance, or direct threats against their families. In political science terms, this constitutes a form of preventive repression: it is not only what has been done that is punished, but what could be done. And, of course, whether or not a real crime

exists —which it never does— is irrelevant; what matters is what the de facto power decides to punish.

In the aftermath of July 28, 2024, repression reached unprecedented levels: more than 2,500 arbitrary detentions in just hours, dozens killed in protests, mass raids, and a campaign of terror aimed at suppressing any social reaction. This was accompanied by the intensification of the infamous *Operación Tuntún* (Operation Knock Knock), openly announced by the regime itself as a mechanism of persecution.

One of the most brutal cases is that of Lauriannys Cedeño, a 16-year-old girl abducted on August 14, 2024, in Carúpano, Sucre, for having forwarded WhatsApp messages expressing dissatisfaction with the electoral results. Reported by a pro-government militant linked to the local *Unidad de Batalla Hugo Chávez* (UBCh), Lauriannys suffered a nervous breakdown during her detention that caused permanent neurological damage. She now suffers from seizures and panic attacks. Her “crime” was to express an opinion.

People are punished for engaging in politics and punished for speaking about politics. They are punished, in general, for attempting to build a republic while barbarism seeks to destroy it. And age, gender, activity, or place do not matter. As Milovan Djilas wrote in *La Nueva Clase*: “because of its monopoly and its totalitarianism, the new class inevitably finds itself at war with everything it does not administer or control, and must deliberately seek to defeat or destroy it.”

Engaging in Politics Abroad: Transnational Terror

The cost of engaging in politics against the Chavista narco-tyranny does not end at Venezuela’s borders. On the contrary,

in recent years the transnational reach of the regime's political violence has become evident.

The murder of former Venezuelan lieutenant Ronald Ojeda in Chile, abducted and executed with clear indications of the involvement of criminal networks linked to Chavismo, marked a turning point. Similarly, the attempted assassination of activists Luis Peche and Yendri Velásquez in Bogotá confirmed that exile does not guarantee safety. The message is clear: dissent can be persecuted even outside the country.

This constitutes a pattern of extraterritorial repression, characteristic of regimes that no longer operate as entities confined to the nation-state, but rather as criminal organizations with operational capacity across the region.

Defending Human Rights in a State That Violates Them

If engaging in politics is dangerous, defending human rights is even more so. In Venezuela, NGOs are not seen as civil actors, but as internal enemies. Documenting abuses, supporting victims, denouncing disappearances or torture is considered a direct threat to those in power.

Those who work in this field face not only the risk of detention, but also campaigns of stigmatization, asset freezes, raids, legal criminalization, and persecution of family members. Defending political prisoners becomes, paradoxically, a cause that generates new political prisoners.

This responds to a clear logic: to destroy mechanisms of accountability and isolate victims. The regime understands that the greatest threat is not international denunciation in itself, but

the accumulation of evidence, testimonies, and documentation that undermine its official narrative.

Journalism Under Siege

Journalism in Venezuela is no longer practiced under prior censorship, but under censorship by terror. There is no need to formally ban a word when it is known that using it may result in the closure of a media outlet, dismissal, imprisonment, or exile.

Today, there are more than twenty journalists imprisoned in Venezuela. Others have been forced to flee. Dozens practice forced self-censorship in order to survive. But what is most revealing is that not even extreme self-censorship guarantees protection.

In 2025, journalists who had spent years practicing a form of self-censorship that bordered on official propaganda (avoiding sensitive topics, softening language, reproducing regime statements) were dismissed from radio stations simply for mentioning that a Venezuelan woman had won the Nobel Peace Prize. Some barely developed the story. Others did not even mention the name María Corina Machado. It was enough to say, “a Venezuelan woman won the Nobel.” Just that.

The message is brutal: not even silence is enough.

The cost is not only professional; it is existential. The journalist measures every word, every headline, every adjective. The mistake is not correctable: it can be definitive. And yet, many continue reporting. Because remaining silent also carries an unbearable moral cost.

Academia, Thought, and Speech

Not even academic analysis escapes persecution. Professors, researchers, writers, and analysts have been harassed, threatened, forced into silence or exile. In some cases, the reason was as simple—and as brutal—as a social media post.

This reveals a central feature of late-stage Chavismo: fear of thought. Not armed thought, nor conspiratorial thought, but critical thinking. The tyranny understands that those who name reality weaken it.

For that reason, writing becomes an act of resistance. Analyzing becomes a form of militancy. Publishing data becomes a provocation.

Exile as Political Punishment

There are now nearly nine million Venezuelan migrants and refugees. Not all of them are activists, but a significant portion of recent political exile is directly the result of post-July 28 repression.

Exile is not only a geographic displacement. It is a rupture of life itself. Many left without saying goodbye to their parents, their children, their siblings. Others left knowing they might never see them again. The emotional cost is incalculable.

There are paradigmatic cases: people who left the country for the first time in their lives at sixty years old, not by choice, but for survival. Broken up families. Lives put on hold. Identities suspended.

Exile serves a dual function for the tyranny: it removes opponents from the territory and disperses resistance, forcing it to reorganize from abroad.

Doing Politics Without Farewells

Perhaps the cruelest cost of doing politics in Venezuela is precisely this: the impossibility of saying goodbye. There is no ritual, no closure, no transition. Departure is abrupt. Silence is mandatory. The embrace is postponed indefinitely.

Doing politics means accepting the real possibility of not returning. Of not burying one's parents. Of not seeing one's children grow up. Of becoming an absence. And yet, thousands continue to do so.

The Price of Dignity

Doing politics in Venezuela is not a career, nor an ambition, nor an electoral strategy. It is an ethical decision. One that is paid for with security, with stability, with family, with freedom, and, in many cases, with life.

Chavismo has managed to transform political participation into a high-risk act. But it has also achieved something more dangerous for itself: creating a citizenry that knows exactly how much freedom costs.

And still, it continues to demand it.

Because if there is one thing the Venezuelan experience proves, it is that tyrannies may control territories, bodies, and silences—but they never fully manage to control ideas, nor memory, nor speech.

One of the hardest things at the beginning –the toughest part– is that you are torn away from your loved ones and from your life overnight. There is no time to say goodbye, for that last hug, that last kiss, that last family meal. Everything happens so fast that you are not given time to process it.

That sudden rupture is intertwined with something equally difficult: uncertainty.

Uncertainty about where you will live, how long you will be able to stay in one country, whether tomorrow you will have to move to another, how long a job will last, or whether you will be able to put down roots without feeling that you are betraying your country.

Added to all of this is a reality that almost no one talks about: living out of a suitcase.

Constant moves, living between hotels, borrowed rooms, or Airbnbs, the impossibility of renting because you lack legal mechanisms... all of that strips away the most basic sense of stability. When everything you own fits in a suitcase, when nothing is truly yours or permanent, when what you knew is left behind, the emotional toll is enormous. Everything feels temporary. Everything feels borrowed. Everything demands more energy than it seems.

And yet, as you begin to build routines, friendships, or small anchors, another difficult feeling appears: the idea that every step forward is also a step further away from Venezuela. You know rationally that it is not so –that you need stability and a life of your own– but the mind insists on that silent guilt.

Tatiana Andrea Niño Martínez

The Security Crisis in Colombia Defines the 2026 Elections

Introduction

Latin America is facing a political-electoral juncture in which security has become one of the main campaign banners and voter demands. According to InSight Crime, the region reports a homicide rate of 20.2 per 100,000 inhabitants, and approximately 50% of these cases are linked to organized crime. The three most affected countries are Ecuador (38.8), Venezuela (26.2, likely underreported), and Colombia (25.4).

This is reflected in the primary concerns of Latin Americans, especially in an electoral context. Surveys such as those conducted by Bloomberg or Atlas (2024) conclude that the two most pressing issues for voters are corruption and insecurity, particularly related to crime and drug trafficking –surpassing concerns such as inflation and democratic backsliding.¹ In fact, according to *Latinobarómetro*, 53% of people in the region would agree with *a non-democratic government coming to power if it solves these problems*.²

1 More information: <https://www.bloomberglinea.com/opinion/la-crisis-de-seguridad-en-america-latina-impulsa-a-la-derecha/>

2 More information: <https://www.latinobarometro.org/latinobarometro-2024>

Recently, several elections in Latin America have shown that candidates who prioritize solutions to insecurity tend to win or increase their favorability. Examples include President Daniel Noboa in Ecuador,³ President José Antonio Kast in Chile⁴ and presidential candidate Abelardo de la Espriella in Colombia. Most of these figures are positioned on the political right and, in some cases, represent more radical stances. The Colombian scenario is particularly noteworthy given its geopolitical relevance and its history of conflict ahead of the 2026 elections.

Violence in Colombia: A Longstanding Conflict

Colombia is one of the countries with the longest-running armed conflict in the world and the most prolonged in Latin America, spanning more than 50 years. This has generated different episodes or cycles of violence, including bipartisan sectarian violence (1945–1953), mafia-related violence (1954–1964), guerrilla violence (1960–1980), and the waves of violence during the 1990s.⁵ According to the Unit for Victims, there are records of more than 10 million victims of the armed conflict in the country, resulting from more than 13 million victimizing events such as kidnapping, homicide, forced disappearance, torture, and forced displacement,

3 More information: <https://www.dw.com/es/ecuador-acorralado-por-la-violencia-las-opciones-de-noboa/a-72705932>

4 More information: https://www.segurilatam.com/actualidad/propuestas-de-kast-en-seguridad-e-inmigracion_20251216.html

5 There are multiple typologies of cycles of violence. This one is proposed by Palacios and Safford (2012). More information: *Historia de Colombia: país fragmentado, sociedad dividida - Historia de Colombia: país fragmentado, sociedad dividida* - Primera parte - Obras generales - Colecciones digitales - Biblioteca Virtual del Banco de la República.

among others.⁶ In other words, it can be said that approximately one in five people in Colombia has been a victim.

However, security conditions showed a notable improvement following the security policies implemented from the 2000s onward, as well as in the years immediately following the signing of the Final Agreement between the now-defunct FARC-EP and the national government in 2016. In this process, many political actors played crucial roles, including former president Hugo Chávez as a mediator with this armed group. However, this improvement was not permanent. Contrary to expectations, levels of violence have a high probability of increasing after peace negotiations, according to scholars such as Aguirre (2014), Steenkamp (2005), among others.

The withdrawal of the now-defunct FARC-EP from their areas of influence led the National Liberation Army (ELN), post-demobilization armed groups (such as the Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces or Clan del Golfo), and dissident factions of the FARC itself to deploy violent dynamics in order to control illegal economies (drug trafficking, non-traditional illegal mining, and smuggling), according to state entities such as the Ombudsman's Office (2018). As Krause (2012) argues, it is not feasible to expect that a peace agreement will "restore" the state's monopoly of force; rather, what emerges is an oligopoly.

According to figures from the Risk Monitoring Mechanism of the Comprehensive Peace System, between December 1, 2016, and August 7, 2022, a total of 13,223 incidents or events related to the armed conflict were reported. Of these, 62% were concentrated

6 More information: <https://datos.paz.unidadvictimas.gov.co/registro-unico-de-victimas/>

between 2021 and 2022.⁷ In addition, 353 signatories of the Final Agreement and 1,054 social leaders were killed. Since then – a period that coincides with the inauguration of the current government of Gustavo Petro – violence has increased and intensified.

The Failed Bet of Total Peace

Total Peace is the public policy promoted by the current government, aimed at achieving peace through agreements with illegal armed groups in accordance with Law 2272 of 2022. This has been carried out through negotiation tables and/or strategies of submission to justice with more than eight Organized Armed Groups (GAOs) and Organized Criminal Groups (GDOs) simultaneously.

As previously mentioned, security conditions in Colombia became more complex in the years following the Final Agreement (2016). In addition to this, the Total Peace policy did not contain these threats; on the contrary, it triggered critical dynamics within this context. Currently, the conflict is more atomized and fragmented, with armed groups increasing their presence and territorial control. This varies by region, but according to the Foundation for Peace and Reconciliation (*Fundación Ideas para la Paz*), there are 14 zones under dispute: double the number reported at the beginning of President Petro’s term.

Between July 2024 and June 2025, the highest levels of armed actions since 2010 were recorded, with a 140% increase in attacks on infrastructure, 111% against the public security forces, and 68%

7 Available at: <https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoiaMGE2MmFkMTQtOGQ3MC00MGQ0LWEzYzUtYWQ1NTZkYzljMmE1IiwidCI6ImQ3MjlkMmMxLTk4OWUtNDRINS1iN2M1LTE4MmM5MTRhYzYwNyIsImMiOiR9>

in clashes between armed groups. In addition, GAOs increased their presence by 15%, according to information from the Critical Threat Capabilities Assessment (Accam) of the Colombian Public Armed Security Forces (Fuerza Pública). The Clan del Golfo is the largest group, with 8,945 members (+18%), followed by the ELN with 6,450 members (+3%), and finally the FARC-EP dissidents led by “Iván Mordisco,” with 3,919 members (+20%).⁸

Venezuela: ¿mediador?

One of the most critical cases of the “Total Peace” policy was the Catatumbo crisis, which began in January 2025. A territorial dispute emerged between the ELN and the 33rd Front of FARC dissidents, involving homicides, explosive attacks, land dispossession, and the largest mass forced displacement since 1997 (65,000 people according to the Ombudsman’s Office).

As a result, the national government suspended the negotiation table with the ELN, stating that it “has no desire for peace.” In this context, the role of the Venezuelan government remained ambiguous, as it has been suggested that Maduro allowed the movement of ELN guerrillas through Venezuelan territory.

In this regard, it is important to highlight that both the ELN and FARC dissident groups are binational in nature –that is, they operate in both Colombia and Venezuela. For this reason, the role of former president Hugo Chávez was once useful in facilitating negotiations between the now-defunct FARC-EP and the Colombian government.

8 More information: <https://ideaspaz.org/publicaciones/investigaciones-analisis/2025-11/lo-que-dicen-las-nuevas-cifras-sobre-el-aumento-de-integrantes-de-grupos-armados-en-colombia>

However, today the neighboring country serves as a strategic rear base for these Organized Armed Groups, allowing them to strengthen their operations, and it is far from acting as a mediator in resolving the Colombian conflict.

The case of the ELN is particularly noteworthy, given the near-hegemonic control it holds along the border. This guerrilla group has used Venezuela as a refuge since the 1980s, particularly in the state of Apure. At that time, the Venezuelan government was hostile toward this Organized Armed Group (GAO). However, this changed with Hugo Chávez's rise to the presidency in 1999, and the guerrilla began to establish itself, benefiting from illicit rents and the struggle for control of the border.

Currently, the ELN has expanded beyond Apure. According to InSight Crime, the guerrilla operates in 40 municipalities across 8 of the country's 24 states, mainly in Zulia, Táchira, Apure, and Amazonas. In this way, it has created clandestine radio stations, controls the distribution of food provided by the state (Local Committees for Supply and Production - CLAP), and benefits from illegal rents such as illegal mining and cocaine production zones.⁹ Both academics and experts on the subject point out that this strengthening is largely based on the relationship between the regime and the guerrilla.

This can be illustrated by many cases, but two stand out. On the one hand, the ELN announced a 72-hour armed strike starting on December 14 in Colombia as a "protest" against what it described as a new phase of Trump's "neocolonial plan" and the alleged threat of intervention in Latin America and the

9 More information: <https://insightcrime.org/es/noticias-crimen-organizado-venezuela/eln-en-venezuela/>

Caribbean,¹⁰ position supported by the Venezuelan regime. On the other hand, the close relationship between the governor of Táchira, Freddy Bernal, and the ELN dates back to 2010, when the guerrilla group helped displace *Los Rastrojos*¹¹ from the state. Since then, cooperation has been such that citizens identify the ELN as an extension of the state, not only in Táchira. There are even officials who claim that the guerrilla uses its profits to finance public institutions and carries out parallel justice functions.¹²

Presidential Elections 2026

In this context of a security crisis and a neighboring regime that shelters Organized Armed Groups (GAOs) with impact on the country, presidential elections will take place in Colombia, specifically on May 31, 2026. If none of the candidates obtains more than 50% of the vote in these elections, the runoff will be held on June 21. According to the most recent Invamer survey (November 2025), public order ranks as the leading national concern at 35.3%, the highest figure since this measurement began in 2017.

Likewise, the two presidential candidates leading the survey are, first, Iván Cepeda with 31.9%, who represents continuity with the current government from a left-wing position. He has a long political trajectory in Congress, is the architect of the *Total Peace* policy, and is also recognized as a victim and witness in the case

10 More information: <https://www.elespectador.com/colombia-20/conflicto/el-n-anuncia-paro-armado-de-72-horas-en-todo-el-pais-desde-el-14-de-diciembre/>

11 Colombian criminal group. It emerged from a faction of the Norte del Valle Cartel.

12 More information: <https://insightcrime.org/es/investigaciones/gobernanza-rebelde-control-social-el-n-tachira/>

against former president Álvaro Uribe.¹³ He was selected through an inter-party primary. Regarding Nicolás Maduro's regime, his position is that the results of the July 28 election "must be verified" and that he would not replicate the positions of former president Duque.

In second place is Abelardo De la Espriella with 18.2%, who is considered a political outsider, with professional experience in criminal law. He has defended politicians accused of parapolitics and figures such as Alex Saab, accused of being a frontman for Nicolás Maduro;¹⁴ as well as victims of femicide and gender-based violence on a pro bono basis. He draws inspiration from leaders such as Bukele, Milei, and Trump, representing a radical right-wing position. He promotes a "hardline" approach to terrorism and positions himself well beyond the traditional right. Regarding the situation in Venezuela, he has praised U.S. pressure and stated that "a democrat cannot have any kind of relationship with tyrants, neither with Maduro, nor Ortega, nor Díaz-Canel in Cuba."¹⁵

While it is still too early to determine definitively whether these candidates will make it to the runoff, it appears that the contest is shaping up between them, and with it, the security approach that Colombia will pursue. Whereas Cepeda is committed to continuing the *Total Peace* policy, for De la Espriella the alternative is far more radical, both in terms of the violence scenario and with respect to Venezuela. Despite this, there are other candidates closer to the political center who remain in the race.

13 More information <https://www.lasillavacia.com/silla-nacional/guia-para-entender-el-juicio-a-alvaro-uribe/>

14 More information: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/c03yz2r4wxxo>

15 More information: https://www.youtube.com/live/dMSUYMX9Wp0?si=mGl3VQ_kLEAV599_

Conclusions

Colombia, like other countries in the region, will face presidential elections in which security shifts from being just another variable to becoming a central axis. Although the current security situation is not comparable to the most critical periods of the 1980s and 1990s, there is a resurgence of conflict compared to the previous five-year period. These conditions are further complicated by the presence of binational guerrilla groups operating in Venezuela. For this reason, candidates' positions toward Nicolás Maduro's regime and, consequently, the state's deployment along the Colombia-Venezuela border, will also be decisive.

In this sense, it will be essential to have candidates capable of addressing this issue effectively, as the expansion and fragmentation of the Colombian conflict appears imminent. Proposals, therefore, should not be limited to emotional rhetoric without substance or clear strategies. As a result, voters face significant ethical challenges, as they are expected not to choose between populist messianisms, but rather between concrete ideas within the framework of legality that take foreign policy into account. In 2026, the country will elect a new president, following the first left-wing administration in 200 years. With this decision, it will also choose the security model it hopes will mitigate the current security crisis.

Mauricio Caldas

When Voting is not Enough. Drug Trafficking, Elections, and Democratic Hollowing

Introduction: A Misframed Problem

The debate on the relationship between drug trafficking and the political system in Colombia has been predominantly framed as a problem of electoral illegality, administrative corruption, or public security. Under this approach, the influence of criminal economies on politics is conceived as an external anomaly that disrupts the democratic process, and whose solution would depend primarily on strengthening criminal enforcement and electoral oversight mechanisms. However, this approach is insufficient to understand the depth of the phenomenon.

Democratic theory has repeatedly warned that democracy is not exhausted by the periodic holding of elections. Robert A. Dahl emphasized that even in regimes with competitive elections, democracy requires real conditions for participation and opposition for the procedure to have normative meaning.¹ Furthermore, David Beetham argued that political power can only be conside-

1 Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1971, 2-3.

red legitimate when it is exercised according to justifiable rules and with consent expressed under non-coercive conditions.²

When these substantive conditions are persistently affected –by coercion, institutional capture, or the structural influence of de facto powers– the formal compliance with electoral rules loses its legitimizing capacity. Guillermo O’Donnell warned that regimes may persist with regular elections while still exhibiting profound deficits in accountability and in the quality of democratic representation.³ In such contexts, the problem is not only the occasional violation of the rules of the game, but the institutional validation of processes that lack the minimum conditions required to express the free and equal will of citizens.⁴

This article starts from that tension between electoral legality and democratic legitimacy and proposes to analyze it in the context of political systems shaped by persistent criminal economies.

1. Democracy, Legality, and Legitimacy: The Normative Framework

Contemporary democracy is often evaluated, in institutional practice, on the basis of compliance with formal procedures, especially the periodic holding of competitive elections. However, democratic theory has established a broad consensus that the legality of the electoral procedure constitutes a necessary but not sufficient condition for the existence of a legitimate democracy.

2 David Beetham, *The Legitimation of Power*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1991, 15-16.

3 Guillermo O’Donnell, “Delegative Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 5, no. 1, 1994, 59.

4 Guillermo O’Donnell, “Horizontal Accountability in New Polyarchies,” *Journal of Democracy* 9, no. 3, 1998, 113.

Democracy entails a set of substantive conditions that allow formal rules to produce politically meaningful and normatively justifiable decisions.⁵

From this perspective, the distinction between legality and legitimacy is central. Legality refers to compliance with previously established rules, while legitimacy is linked to the normative justification of the exercise of power and to the consent of the governed under non-coercive conditions.⁶ An electoral process may therefore be legal without being fully legitimate when the structural conditions under which it takes place affect the freedom of the vote, political equality, or effective competition among alternatives.⁷

The theory of polyarchy emphasizes that elections only gain democratic meaning when they are accompanied by real guarantees of participation, opposition, and pluralism, as well as effective civil liberties.⁸ In the absence of these conditions, the electoral procedure loses its capacity to express the will of the citizenry and becomes a formal mechanism devoid of substantive democratic content. Similarly, the theory of the legitimation of power emphasizes that political consent can only be considered valid when it is produced in contexts free from structural domination or systematic coercion.⁹

5 Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Limits of Self-Government*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010, 12-18.

6 David Beetham, *The Legitimation of Power*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1991, 3-25.

7 Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1996, 110-131.

8 Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, Yale University Press, NewHaven, 1971, 1-9.

9 Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, 83-110.

This normative approach makes it possible to problematize situations in which the democratic order remains formally intact, but its material conditions are eroded. The persistence of legal elections in contexts where de facto powers operate with the capacity to distort political behavior raises a fundamental dilemma: the possibility that democracy continues to function as a legal system while progressively losing its ability to fulfill its normative purposes.¹⁰ The literature on political representation has also warned that the autonomy of representatives and the equal influence among citizens are essential requirements for the electoral process to retain its democratic meaning.¹¹

Consequently, evaluating democratic quality exclusively on the basis of procedural criteria implies adopting a reduced conception of democracy that is insufficient for analyzing contexts shaped by structural inequalities of power. This normative framework is what allows, in the following sections, for a critical analysis of electoral processes that, while legal, may lack substantive democratic legitimacy.¹²

2. Democracies That Degrade Without Institutional Rupture

One of the main limitations of traditional approaches to democratic crises is their tendency to associate democratic deterioration with events of abrupt rupture, such as *coups d'état*, the suspension of elections, or explicit breakdowns of the constitutional order. However, contemporary political theory has shown that demo-

10 Guillermo O' Donnell, "Horizontal Accountability in New Polyarchies", *Journal of Democracy* 9, no. 3, 1998, 112-126.

11 Jane Mansbridge, "Rethinking Representation", *American Political Science Review* 97, no.4, 2003, 515-528.

12 Pierre Rosanvallon, *Democratic Legitimacy: Impartiality, Reflexivity, Proximity*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2011), 1-22.

cratic regimes can experience processes of profound degradation without a formal rupture of their fundamental institutions.¹³

In these scenarios, democracy does not disappear, but rather gradually transforms from within. Elections continue to be held, formal authorities remain in office, and the legal framework remains in force, but the practices that give substantive content to the democratic regime progressively weaken. This type of erosion is characterized by the persistence of legal procedures that coexist with the loss of effective checks, the weakening of accountability, and the distortion of political competition.¹⁴

The literature has identified that these processes of degradation are often supported by the institutional normalization of practices that, although legally tolerated, structurally affect democratic quality.¹⁵ Rather than openly violating the rules of the game, political actors operate within them, exploiting their loopholes and limits to concentrate power, restrict effective pluralism, or neutralize mechanisms of control. In this way, legality is preserved, but its capacity to guarantee democratically legitimate outcomes is reduced.

This framework is particularly useful for analyzing contexts in which democracy remains as a legal system but loses its normative density. The persistence of regular elections does not, by itself, guarantee that the regime retains its democratic character if the conditions under which those elections take place are syste-

13 Steven Levitsky y Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, Crown, New York, 2018, 3-24.

14 Nancy Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding", *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1, 2016, 5-19.

15 Steven Levitsky y Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010, 7-14.

matically distorted.¹⁶ In such cases, degradation does not manifest as a visible crisis, but as a cumulative process that progressively weakens public trust and reconfigures political incentives.

Understanding democracy as a regime susceptible to degradation without rupture allows the analysis to shift from the question of the system's formal survival to the evaluation of the quality and authenticity of its practices. This distinction is fundamental for addressing phenomena in which the democratic order persists institutionally but is affected by structural dynamics that erode its legitimacy from within.¹⁷

3. Drug Trafficking, Criminal Power, and Structural Distortion of the Electoral Process

The influence of drug trafficking on politics cannot be understood solely as an illegal interference external to the democratic system. Various studies have shown that democracy can coexist with persistent structures of coercive power that, without formally replacing institutions, substantially alter the conditions under which political competition takes place. In these contexts, the central problem is not the absence of elections, but the transformation of their democratic meaning.¹⁸

The literature on electoral integrity has pointed out that electoral processes may comply with basic procedural requirements and still unfold under conditions that affect the freedom of the

16 Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Limits of Self-Government*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010, 136-160.

17 Guillermo O' Donnell, "Illusions about Consolidation", *Journal of Democracy* 7, no.2, 1996, 34-51.

18 Charles Tilly, *Democracy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007, 1-12.

vote, political equality, and effective competition.¹⁹ These distortions do not always take the form of overt fraud or visible violence, but instead operate structurally through illicit financing, indirect intimidation, the capture of local authorities, or territorial control by armed actors. When these conditions persist, electoral competition takes place under profound asymmetries that systematically favor certain actors.

From an institutional perspective, these dynamics are particularly problematic because they can coexist with electorally legal processes and with formally legitimate authorities. The evaluation of democratic quality based exclusively on procedural compliance tends to obscure the effects of structural coercion and power inequality on electoral behavior.²⁰ Consequently, elections may become mechanisms of formal validation of power relations previously configured outside the democratic sphere.

Comparative political science has warned that the presence of organized violence and illicit economies in electoral contexts affects not only outcomes, but also the incentives of political actors. In these scenarios, candidate selection, electoral mobilization, and the exercise of public office are conditioned by the need to adapt to illegal power structures, which reduces the autonomy of elected representatives and weakens the accountability relationship with citizens.²¹

19 Pippa Norris, *Why Electoral Integrity Matters*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014, 19-41.

20 Sarah Birch, *Electoral Malpractice*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011, 3-22.

21 John Bailey y Matthew M. Taylor, "Evade, Corrupt, or Confront? Organized Crime and the State in Brazil and Mexico", *Journal of Politics in Latin America* 1, no. 2, 2009, 3-29.

From a normative standpoint, the problem does not lie in the absence of elections, but in the institutional normalization of electoral processes held under structurally anti-democratic conditions. When the state recognizes processes that take place in contexts of persistent coercion as fully valid, it inadvertently contributes to the stabilization of a political order that complies with formal legality but lacks substantive democratic legitimacy.²²

4. The Colombian Case: Territorial Fragmentation and Institutional Validation

The Colombian case illustrates with particular clarity how a democracy can maintain its formal functioning while experiencing a substantive fragmentation of its democratic standards across the territory. At the national level, the political system preserves periodic elections and institutional recognition of their results. However, in various local contexts, electoral processes take place under structural conditions of coercion, territorial control, and institutional capture associated with persistent criminal economies.²³

These dynamics do not constitute isolated phenomena. The Electoral Observation Mission has repeatedly documented the existence of systematic risks to the right to vote, political competition, and the autonomy of local actors in large areas of the country.²⁴ In these scenarios, electoral competition is shaped by power asymmetries that affect candidate selection and the effective exercise of political representation.

22 International Crisis Group, analytical reports on governance, violence, and politics in Colombia, *Latin America Reports*.

23 International Crisis Group, reports on elections and armed actors in Colombia, *Latin America Reports*, various editions.

24 Electoral Observation Mission (MOE), *Maps and Factors of Electoral Risk*, various editions.

A critical element is the role of the state as an institutional validator of processes that are electorally legal but democratically problematic. Analytical reports on Colombia have warned that evaluating electoral processes exclusively on the basis of procedural criteria tends to obscure the material conditions under which votes are cast, thereby contributing to the normalization of uneven standards of democratic quality within the same political regime.

From a normative perspective, this territorial fragmentation not only affects the local contexts involved, but also has systemic effects on Colombian democracy as a whole, by weakening the principle of political equality and eroding public trust in democracy as an effective mechanism of representation.

Conclusion: The Democratic Dilemma

The analysis developed throughout this article supports the argument that the relationship between drug trafficking and the political system cannot be adequately understood if it is limited to isolated instances of electoral crime or to specific failures of institutional oversight. The central problem is normative in nature: the capacity of democracy to produce legitimate decisions when electoral processes take place under structural conditions of persistent criminal power.

The coexistence of legally valid elections with contexts of coercion, territorial capture, and deep power asymmetries highlights the limits of a strictly procedural conception of democracy. When the evaluation of democratic legitimacy is reduced to formal compliance with electoral rules, there is a risk of normalizing processes that lack the minimum conditions required to express the free and equal will of citizens. In such scenarios, elections cease to operate as effective mechanisms of representation

and instead become instruments of legal validation of power relations configured outside the democratic sphere.

The Colombian case clearly illustrates the consequences of this tension. The territorial fragmentation of democratic standards and the institutional validation of electorally legal but substantively distorted processes generate effects that transcend the local level and affect the quality of the democratic regime as a whole. The persistence of these patterns erodes the principle of political equality, weakens accountability, and undermines public trust in democracy as a form of government.

Recognizing this dilemma does not imply disregarding the importance of elections, but rather demanding that their evaluation incorporate substantive criteria consistent with the normative purposes of democracy. As long as this discussion is not explicitly addressed, democracy risks surviving formally while being progressively emptied of its essential democratic content.

Ayrton Monsalve

We Are All Alejandro

Written with the hope that, in a few years, when the Venezuelan State once again sends thousands of young people abroad, it will be for studying, "trusting that their free minds will return to transform the country."

On December 10, 2025, coinciding with International Human Rights Day, La TV Calle officially presented Alejandro's Route to the United States, an interactive documentary that reconstructs, in the protagonist's own voice, the migration journey of a young Venezuelan who was forced to leave the country in 2023. The production is the result of five months of independent work, deeply committed to the duty of memory.

I had the honor of writing this story and of serving as the channel through which Alejandro's testimony was gathered, with narrative and emotional responsibility.

Alejandro is a young man who represents an entire generation expelled by a State that, far from guaranteeing rights, systematically violated them. The journey he recounts includes border crossings through Colombian trochas, the passage through the Darién Gap, the risks of extortion in Central America, and traveling atop the train cars known as La Bestia in Mexico. His story

is not exceptional. On the contrary, it reflects what thousands of young Venezuelans have experienced in recent years.

That same day, hundreds of kilometers away, in Oslo, Norway, the international community witnessed another deeply symbolic moment: the awarding of the 2025 Nobel Peace Prize to opposition leader María Corina Machado, who was unable to arrive in time for the ceremony due to adverse conditions and the security risks associated with the complex and clandestine route she had to take to leave Venezuela. However, in an episode that quickly became part of contemporary political memory, she managed to arrive in Oslo in the early hours of December 11, overcoming all obstacles, and her presence, though delayed, became an even more powerful symbol of Venezuela's democratic struggle and of the epic civil resistance against a dictatorship.

Her daughter, acting as her representative at the ceremony, delivered a speech that, without intending to do so, served as an echo to Alejandro's testimony.

"The economy collapsed by more than 80%. Poverty surpassed 86%. Nine million Venezuelans were forced to flee. These are not statistics; they are open wounds."¹

At the same time, Alejandro speaks through audiovisual storytelling, and his story resonates with the same wounds. As Machado's daughter described the regime's calculated method to "divide us by our ideas, by race, by origin, by way of life," and denounced how Venezuelans have been pushed to remain silent and distrust one another, Alejandro's documented testimony

1 Official Nobel Peace Prize lecture, December 10, 2025. Source: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2025/machado/lecture/>

reinforces her words through the language of the body, of mud, of exposure.

Alejandro is not a metaphor. He is a witness. His story is part of that cartography of exile that demands to be documented with ethics, care, and memory. In this sense, Alejandro's Route not only brings visibility to a single case, but also proposes a new way of narrating the Venezuelan forced exodus: from its protagonists, from the ground, from the traces left by the feet that walk in order to survive.

Who Are We, the Alejandros?

The question is not rhetorical. I write it as someone who feels it as well. Because if there is one thing I have understood while reconstructing Alejandro's testimony, it is that Venezuelan forced migration is not an exception. It is a shared condition, with multiple routes, causes, and destinations.

Indeed, Venezuelans do not migrate solely for economic reasons, although these are often decisive. They also leave because of the systematic denial of their civil and political rights, due to persecution, censorship, direct repression, or the gradual silencing of their life projects.

We can group these causes into two broad categories:

1. The inability to exercise economic and social rights: access to healthcare, education, decent employment, housing, and public services.
2. The violation of civil and political rights: freedom of expression, association, participation, organization, and protection against arbitrary detention.

Alejandro represents those who embody the intersection of both dimensions. His decision to migrate was the result of years of political harassment, enforced silence, and a growing sense of risk due to his ideas and his environment, as well as the impossibility of building a dignified life project. He was unable to study, pursue a profession, or access employment that would allow him to support himself. But he understood that none of this was a matter of misfortune or bad luck. It was the result of a political regime that stripped him of his rights. He did not flee hunger alone. He fled a dictatorship.

And while I was listening to him and writing his story, I was also going through my own process of forced migration. Unlike Alejandro, I did not take the jungle route, but the dispossession is the same. My destination was the southern part of the continent, yet the distance from my country is measured in the same way: in nostalgia, in helplessness, and in grief. Because migration is an inner fracture, and no one returns the same.

Alejandro is a symbol —but also a symptom— of what is at stake: the young Venezuelan body, with desires and aspirations, put to the test by exposure, violence, and criminalization. He represents those who have had to sleep at the edge of nothingness, hoping that one day they might become full citizens.

And when we say We Are All Alejandro, it is not to repeat an empty slogan. It is because Alejandro embodies a collective experience deeply rooted in the emotional memory of the Venezuelan diaspora. His story is not distant: it lives in thousands of disrupted, displaced, and violated young lives. In every Venezuelan home, there is an Alejandro: a brother who left without return, a cousin who wrote from a shelter in Texas, a father who disappeared in the jungle without a trace. He is also reflected in those who crossed the Andes on foot on their way to Chile, or

those who traversed Brazil's Amazon for ten days before reaching Argentina. Like so many others, Alejandro is one of those who said, "I'm going to turn myself in. I'm already inside the United States," while on the other side, their families were left suspended in silence, trapped in uncertainty —unsure whether they would hear from him again, whether that message announcing arrival to "safe ground" would be the last or the first of a new chapter.

In those hours, days, or weeks of waiting, the shared trauma of a migrant country reveals itself, a fractured citizenry forced to say goodbye without certainty. That is why we say we are all Alejandro: because his journey is a symptom of a deeper structural rupture: The rupture of the bond between citizenship and the State, between rights and their guarantee, between the country we dreamed of and the country that expelled us.

That emotional bond —both intimate and collective— is as powerful as Alejandro's story itself. Because what has been broken in Venezuela is not only the social contract, but the human fabric that held us together. It is the possibility of building a life within our own borders without being forced to flee by violence, authoritarianism, or institutional collapse.

As was also heard in the official 2025 Nobel Peace Prize speech: "They suffocated us, imprisoned us, killed us, and pushed us into exile."

And yet, we continue. Because even though they tried to erase us, we still tell our stories. We still exist. We still write.

And that is precisely what Alejandro's Route is: a way of not giving up. A way of saying that we are still telling our story. That we are still alive.

In the Absence of Protection Cooperation, Extortion Networks Proliferate

Alejandro's journey is not only harrowing because of the personal testimony it contains, but because of the mirror it holds up to us: the absence of minimum guarantees for Venezuelan migrants in transit. The passage through *trochas*, the trek across the Darién Gap, and the journey through Central America and Mexico are not merely geographic routes. They are territories of structural vulnerability where human life is negotiated daily among criminal networks, irregular armed groups, corrupt police forces, and local mafias.

Alejandro experienced this from the very beginning. In Urabá, Antioquia, the starting point of the Darién jungle, he witnessed how migrants' need is instrumentalized. Street vendors, improvised "guides," transporters, and a chain of services operating on the edge of legality together create a system of profit built on desperation. What should be a humanitarian corridor is in the hands of parallel economies. What should offer assistance and protection instead pushes migrants into new forms of violence, with inflated prices for a toothbrush or a bottle of water, and veiled threats if they refuse to "pay for safe passage."

Today, in December 2025, Noticias Caracol² documents the operation of these trafficking networks under "tour package" logics, where all-inclusive services are offered to leave the country through irregular routes. But Alejandro was already experiencing this in 2023.

2 Noticias Caracol, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DSSlhGmjcXk/?igsh=NWk5c3ZqYnc0MzFw>

The bus that picked them up at 1:00 a.m. carried them on a journey that lasted between 12 and 14 hours, until they reached Necoclí, in the Urabá region of Antioquia. As soon as they got off, the conversation among migrants revolved around a key question: “Do you already have a guide?” Everyone knew it was not optional. The guides charged between 300 and 350 dollars and controlled the route.

That was how they met Mateo: a Colombian man, tall, stocky, dark-skinned. He introduced himself as a guide and offered them a “full package”: one night’s stay in a hotel, breakfast the next day, and the boat to the departure point to cross the Darién on August 31. The structure was clear: an entire logistical system designed to make money from migrant mobility. They shared a room with 15 people. One bathroom for everyone.

And even worse: many thought the hardest part would be the Darién. But it wasn’t. For Alejandro —and for many of the testimonies collected after the publication of this interactive story— the greatest lack of protection came afterward. The jungle is cruel, yes, but predictable in its brutality. In contrast, the transit through Central America involves a different kind of cruelty: arbitrary bureaucracies, systematic extortion, and a lack of coordination between states. No country seems to assume regional responsibility for the migration phenomenon. In that vacuum, migrants face corrupt checkpoints, express kidnappings, illegal fees for transit permits, and even detention centers without international oversight.

Migration has, in many stretches, become a business. And the migrant’s body has become a commodity. This is not a metaphor. Alejandro’s Route is not just one person’s testimony. It is an interactive denunciation. It is a chronicle of what happens when

forced migration becomes a market and humanitarian corridors do not exist.

Alejandro's Route: A Shared Responsibility with the Truth

Across much of Latin America, both governments that identify as right-wing and those that claim to be progressive have ended up using Venezuelan migration as an electoral wildcard. Not to build bridges of justice, but to extract political gain. To blame migrants for state failures, for insecurity, for the labor crisis. They have turned our presence into a problem. A symbol of chaos. A scapegoat.

The term “irregular migration” has served this purpose: to invalidate humanity. To turn the need to seek protection into a crime. To obscure the real reasons that force millions of Venezuelans to leave their land: persecution, poverty, repression, hunger, abandonment. Irregularity does not lie in the body of the person crossing a border, but in the system that expels them and in the States that choose not to look.

This closing is not just a conclusion. It is an act of memory. Alejandro gave his testimony not to awaken pity, but to remind us that the truth cannot be pushed aside. He understood this and embraced it: even though he now faces discrimination, even though he has not yet achieved stability in his destination, he knows his story is valuable because it reflects that of millions. And because when a young person speaks from pain without disguise, he also speaks for those who still have no voice.

Of course, host countries have responsibilities, by action or by omission. By building invisible walls, by promoting laws that criminalize migrants, by denying refuge or abandoning them. But

if we seek truth, we cannot stop there. We must go to the root, as Alejandro did.

And that root has a name: the destruction of the rule of law in Venezuela.

Today, more than nine million Venezuelans live abroad. Not because they suddenly decided to try their luck in a foreign country, but because their country denied them the possibility of living. Because an authoritarian regime dismantled justice, persecuted dissent, devastated institutions, dismantled public services, and distorted the relationship between the State and its citizens. From being a guarantor, the State became an oppressor. The Venezuelan exodus has a structural cause: the systematic and prolonged repression of power over the people.

Alejandro walked to save his life. And now he wants to build a future. But he also wants to build memory. Because without memory there is no truth, and without truth there is no reparation, no justice, no guarantees of non-repetition.

This narrative seeks to be part of that collective construction. A call to look beyond the numbers, to give a face to the tragedy, and to demand that the world stop relativizing the cause of the Venezuelan exodus. Because as long as the dictatorship in Venezuela continues to be normalized, as long as those who suffer it are ignored or the origin of this human tragedy is obscured, there will be no lasting solution, neither for those who have migrated nor for those who continue to resist inside the country.

Alejandro's route is the route of truth. And at some point, we are all Alejandro³.

3 Read the full story of Alejandro's Route to the United States, available in Spanish and English: <https://la-ruta-de-alejandro.latvcalle.com/>.

Conclusion

It is not possible to imagine strong democracies in Latin America while political systems are infiltrated by or placed at the service of criminal organizations. Today, in some contexts, drug trafficking appears to have been normalized as just another actor within political dynamics, as if it were a circumstantial ally or an inevitable source of financing. However, behind that apparent normality, what expands is violence, corruption, and authoritarianism.

Excessive political pragmatism, devoid of values and clear limits, has emptied public life of the fundamental principles that allow societies to resist both authoritarianism and criminal power. When politics renounces its ethical standards and reduces everything to short-term calculations, it opens space for illicit economies to capture decisions, buy party structures, and shape public agendas.

For this reason, this edition seeks to highlight drug trafficking not as an isolated phenomenon, but as a tool used by authoritarian leaders to undermine institutions and concentrate power through gradual strategies. These dynamics penetrate the justice system, state security forces, the media, business sectors, and even traditional political parties, which ultimately end up selling their

structures in exchange for financing. Candidacies are traded, votes are bought, silence in the face of abuses is negotiated, and the existence of cartels or violence in conflict zones is publicly denied, even when communities experience real displacement and threats.

In recent electoral processes in several countries across the continent, it has become evident that drug trafficking not only finances campaigns, but in some cases political leaders are directly part of these networks. The objective is not only to win elections, but to consolidate closed power structures financed by illicit economies that make it possible to sustain repressive apparatuses and establish alliances with other criminal organizations or irregular actors within and beyond the region.

This edition invites reflection on the role of citizens, political parties, and the international community in the face of this phenomenon. Democracy in the region is under threat from a model that is not exclusive to any one country or ideology, and that seeks to expand in order to protect itself. It does not pursue only economic profit, but permanence in power, regardless of the institutional or human cost. Understanding this reality is the first step toward confronting it with responsibility, resolve, and a long-term vision.

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