Juan Miguel Matheus

Pablo Escobar's Dream[1]

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,

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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.