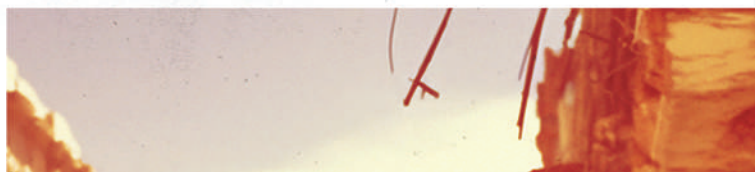


Special Edition

# DE MOC RA



The Earthquake's  
Other Ruins

**Guillermo Ramos Flamerich**

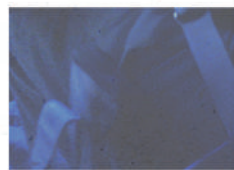
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# TI ZA TION



Democratization  
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# The Earthquake's Other Ruins

Now comes mourning. Now comes anger. Now comes the helplessness over the lives that were lost, over the improvisation and abuse of power. Now, too, will come hope, even as it makes its way through uncertainty, fear, and the vast authoritarian swamp in which Venezuela is submerged.

The earthquakes of June 24, 2026, did not merely shake Venezuelan soil with terrifying force. Once again, they exposed the fractures of a country subjected for years to the destruction of its institutions. Nature struck hard and found a weakened state with feet of clay. As if everything had been a fiction that the earth ultimately swallowed whole. The collapse and destruction at the Misión Vivienda housing complex in Playa Grande are a painful metaphor for an era in which the fundamental task of prevention and protection was subordinated to the interests of a group unwilling to relinquish its privileges.

When an emergency shows that ordinary people, with their own hands, can do more than the military and bureaucratic institutions that did not know how, could not, or would not respond, tragedy becomes abandonment. It is no longer only a natural disaster; it is also anger at a government more concerned

with control than with service. Yet even amid that failure, another truth stands out. The catastrophe speaks to our collective consciousness and reminds us of what we are capable of when we act as a community.

Perhaps that is why one of the most powerful images was that of Tsunami the dog, as a symbol of shared redemption. Amid the disaster, ministers, generals, and officials mattered little. The heroes were neighbors, volunteers, rescue dogs, and international first responders who did what they could with what they had. It was the quiet, everyday heroism of a society that has endured multiple, prolonged crises. In the absence of official answers, a phrase once again spread by word of mouth and across social media, encapsulating the painful lesson we have learned: "Only the people can save the people."

Politics should be built on profound empathy, especially in times of tragedy. Yet while, in the first hours, spontaneous solidarity was the only thing offering relief amid the collective bewilderment, the authorities arrived late. Rather than sharing in the mourning, they sought to justify themselves and contest the narrative of the tragedy. This gap between the urgency of the emergency and the pace of politics says much about the country we are today and the institutions that urgently need to be rebuilt.

The earthquakes revealed the limits placed on our sovereignty. Venezuela was once again seen as a territory available to be ordered by others, while the image of a happy country, euphorically dancing in the streets, was repeated almost mechanically. But we are not happy, much less dancing over our dead. The current U.S. administration sees us as an estate that could be managed from abroad: a protectorate for major decisions and a domestic tyranny for everything else. Colonial domination does not consist

only of occupation; it also involves replacing a people's own will with decisions made abroad and carried out by local overseers. These are other ruins: those of a sovereignty that had already been battered despite the patriotic rhetoric. But the Venezuelan people have different concerns. They are not concerned with the division of power, but with the homes that collapsed, the family member who was lost, the hospital that does not work, the lack of electricity and water, shrinking wages, and the phrase that says so much —one I saw posted a few days ago by illustrator Cristina Estanislao: “Like little ants, each of us, with whatever we can contribute, near and far, will build a country.”

That is why, after so many crises unfolding simultaneously and for so long, democracy ceases to be an abstract word. Democracy means well-being, timely action, institutions that anticipate, public officials who respond, a justice system that investigates, and cities created by and for life —not for demagoguery or opportunism in times of emergency.

Perhaps there are still new periods of controlled authoritarianism, opaque negotiations, and changes managed from above to come. But the path we deserve is a different one: rebuilding democracy. Perhaps that process of reconstruction began before the aftershocks had even ended. It began when strangers dug together through the rubble, when spontaneous networks of solidarity emerged. That was citizenship in action. The task now is to accelerate that process. Mourning is memory, and anger is a demand for democratic rebirth. Venezuela does not merely need to clear away the rubble. It needs to rebuild trust, its institutions, and its independence in freedom. We need to build a republic again.

Adriana Boersner-Herrera

# When the State Fails, the International Community Responds

On June 24, two consecutive earthquakes struck Venezuela, leaving behind destruction, death, and thousands of families in anguish and despair. But beyond the numbers, what was truly revealing was what the tragedy laid bare before the nation and the world: a truth that, for far too long, many had chosen to avoid. The earthquake did not create Venezuela's crisis, but it stripped away every disguise it still wore. Amid collapsed buildings, overwhelmed hospitals, and entire communities waiting for help, the image that emerged was that of a country with no real state capacity to protect its own people in a moment of emergency.

And if any doubt still remains about the political origins of this tragedy, one need only look back. Some of the homes that collapsed or suffered severe damage were not victims of the earthquakes alone, but of an earlier and sustained pattern of negligence: buildings erected in haste, using substandard materials, many of them constructed under the banner of government housing missions and programs designed more to project the image of a benevolent regime than to ensure genuine structural safety. The priority was the number of homes handed over and the propaganda value of the symbolic key ceremony, rather than proper soil assessment and technical oversight, even

in areas already known to be unsuitable for such construction. Another telling fact reinforces this picture: much of the country's network of seismic sensors and monitoring stations became inoperative or obsolete over the years, in some cases through neglect and in others because sensors were dismantled or stolen and never replaced. A country that does not invest in knowing when and where the ground may shake is also a country that does not invest in being prepared when it does.

## **The Hours of Pick and Shovel**

In major disasters, the first hours are everything. They are the hours when a rescue team can pull someone alive from beneath a collapsed structure, when an ambulance arriving in time makes the difference between recovery and death, when institutional coordination, the availability of properly equipped hospitals, and the resilience of public infrastructure cease to be administrative concerns and become matters of life and death. While family members, neighbors, and volunteers improvised with their own hands, armed with little more than picks and shovels, or organized fundraisers to rent search-and-rescue and debris-removal equipment, eyewitness accounts from various areas revealed a telling scene: a lack of trained personnel and machinery, institutional delays, disorganization, and a military presence that proved incapable of responding to the scale of the tragedy. Instead, it exposed the true nature of security forces that had spent years being trained to control, intimidate, repress, and kill —but not to rescue, protect, and coordinate a large-scale humanitarian response.

## **The Presence of the International Community**

It was precisely in that vacuum that the international community assumed a central role. Foreign assistance did not arrive as

a minor supplement or a diplomatic formality, but as an urgent necessity. International search-and-rescue teams, medical personnel, technical specialists, and emergency coordination units began doing, in different parts of the country, what Venezuela's own institutions were unable to do with the required speed and effectiveness.

But reducing the international community to heavy machinery, medical brigades, and rescue teams would tell only part of the story. Other actors also proved indispensable: journalists, foreign correspondents, photographers, human rights organizations, technical experts, fact-checking platforms, and members of the Venezuelan diaspora who documented, verified, and disseminated what was happening inside the country. Correspondents from various news outlets reported direct pressure from security officials to halt live broadcasts from affected areas under threat of arrest, while local journalists' associations reported similar restrictions on access. Those restrictions even extended beyond the country's borders: cases were documented in which rescue workers were stranded in airports while awaiting authorization to enter Venezuela.

That episode compels us to broaden our understanding of who truly constitutes the international community that has sustained the country throughout this emergency. It also includes the work of correspondents who persisted in reporting despite mounting pressure, of press associations that documented the obstacles they faced, and of platforms specializing in Latin American journalism that compiled testimonies from reporters whose access to devastated communities and hospitals had been restricted. In a country where those in power contest the narrative as fiercely as they contest the territory, reporting with rigor under pressure has itself become an act of civic resistance and a service to the truth.

## **The Root of the Collapse: Neither Sanctions nor the International Community's "Siege"**

When a country depends on international rescue teams to pull survivors from the rubble, recover bodies, treat the injured, and organize the emergency response, the problem is no longer merely the scale of the natural disaster. The problem is the extent of the prior destruction of the state apparatus. This is not simply a severe earthquake; it is an earthquake that struck at the very fabric of a society already devastated by years of institutional decay, corruption, mismanagement, and the capture of the state by an elite that turned political power into an instrument of its own perpetuation rather than of the common good.

This is something that people who have experienced major earthquakes elsewhere in the world do not always fully understand. Many sincerely sympathized with what was happening in Venezuela, and more than a few, in an effort to express empathy, repeated the same phrase: "I, too, have lived through major earthquakes. I understand what you're going through." Yet, despite its good intentions, that comparison overlooks the essential difference. The distinction lies not in the magnitude of the earthquake, but in the context in which it occurs. Experiencing an earthquake in a country with a functioning state means having emergency protocols, trained rescue teams, operational hospitals, and a chain of command that responds. Experiencing one in Venezuela meant facing, in addition to the earthquake itself, the near-total absence of those safeguards. That is the real earthquake behind the earthquake: the one that transformed a natural disaster into a human catastrophe.

And this must be stated plainly: that institutional weakness cannot be explained by the simplistic narrative centered on sanctions or the so-called "international siege," as the regime has

repeated for years. The state did not fail because it was suddenly deprived of resources or rendered incapable by outside forces. It failed because, for years –even during periods of extraordinary oil wealth– it ignored warnings and diverted, looted, and squandered resources that should have been invested in resilient infrastructure, functional hospitals, reliable public services, and genuine emergency preparedness systems. The underlying problem has never been a lack of resources, but rather their political, clientelist, and patrimonial use for the benefit of those who control power.

## **The Underlying Argument**

The mutual dependence between the Venezuelan regime and the international community is not merely a diplomatic curiosity; it is proof that Venezuela's problem is not the force of the earthquake, but the chronic fragility of a state apparatus that prioritized its own survival above all else. Meanwhile, the international community is forced to operate within the limits imposed by that regime: safe-conduct passes, restrictions on press freedom, and cooperation and negotiation with officials under international sanctions.

Other disasters of similar magnitude offer a useful lesson by contrast. In Haiti, following the 2010 earthquake (magnitude 7.0), the international community ended up almost entirely replacing a collapsed state, with mixed results that now serve as a cautionary tale. In Turkey and Syria, after the 2023 earthquake (magnitude 7.8), international assistance exposed similar disparities between one country with institutions capable of coordinating the response and another devastated by years of war and authoritarian rule. The common lesson is clear: when the international community must replace, rather than simply complement, the state, reconstruction becomes slower, more fragile, and increasingly dependent on the

political will of those who govern the territory. Venezuela is no exception to that logic.

For that reason, the international community should neither withdraw nor remain passive, but act strategically. Its role should not be limited to sending rescue teams, funding, and field hospitals, indispensable though those remain. The experience of other protracted crises shows that it can also play a crucial role in overseeing how aid is administered, helping to ensure that reconstruction does not reproduce the same patterns of corruption and clientelism that worsened the original tragedy. That also means strengthening independent civil society and local organizations already working on the ground, rather than channeling all international assistance exclusively through structures controlled by a regime that has demonstrated its willingness to use even humanitarian aid as an instrument of political control.

Likewise, international cooperation cannot be unconditional. Delivering aid without requiring minimum standards of transparency, unrestricted humanitarian access, and accountability amounts, in practice, to legitimizing the very power that created the vulnerability the world is now trying to remedy. Conditioning assistance does not mean punishing the population or withholding life-saving aid; it means insisting on unobstructed humanitarian corridors, expedited permits for rescue workers and the press, and independent oversight mechanisms to ensure that resources are distributed properly.

The international community can also play a role that extends beyond the immediate response: documenting what has happened. Human rights organizations and United Nations missions have spent years gathering evidence of Venezuela's institutional deterioration, and this tragedy adds yet another

chapter to that record. Carefully documenting patterns of negligence, obstruction, and the political use of humanitarian aid is not merely an academic exercise; it is about laying the groundwork so that, when the day comes that Venezuela is able to demand accountability, there will be a documented record of what occurred. That quiet, sustained work behind the scenes may ultimately prove just as important as any field hospital, especially because the long-term consequences —displacement, interruptions to education, job losses, and new forms of hardship affecting millions of people— will be just as relevant to that record.

Finally, this crisis demands a longer horizon than that of the emergency itself. The fragility exposed by the earthquake is not a recent accident. Decades of institutional decay will not be undone by a single wave of assistance. That is why the international community must think beyond the immediate rescue effort and help design strategies for institutional reconstruction over the medium and long term: technical training, the transfer of expertise in disaster risk management, early warning systems, and the strengthening of local response capacities. Without that sustained commitment —one that must go beyond the creation of a dollar-denominated recovery fund— Venezuela will remain vulnerable, ensuring that the next emergency, whether seismic or of any other kind, encounters exactly the same institutional vacuum as this one.

Within this broader imperative, and with a medium-term horizon in mind, it is impossible to overlook the political process that the United States had already set in motion following the capture of Maduro and Flores earlier this year. The Trump administration outlined three successive phases: stabilization, recovery, and democratic transition. The earthquake struck precisely during the transition between those phases, at a

particularly vulnerable moment when the roadmap had not yet fully taken shape. That coincidence demands more from the United States than limited operational and humanitarian assistance; it requires honoring the responsibility and commitment it has already assumed, so that Venezuela's tragedy is not overshadowed by Washington's domestic priorities during a year marked by the November midterm elections and growing attention to the 2028 presidential race.

The international community has shown that it can extend a helping hand when the ground gives way. It must now demonstrate that it can sustain that commitment with an honest political assessment, without repeating the mistakes of other failed reconstruction efforts. The urgent question is no longer whether Venezuela needs international assistance —that need is evident and undeniable. What truly matters now is whether the world is willing to sustain that assistance over time, while speaking plainly about both the structural causes of the crisis and those responsible for leaving Venezuela so dangerously unprotected in the face of this tragedy.'

Irene Carrasquero

# An Improvised Tsunami

Like any full-fledged natural disaster, the double earthquake of June 24 shook Venezuela unexpectedly and violently. There was no time for hesitation, nor much awareness with which to react.

The dust from the collapsed buildings had not yet settled when Venezuelans, paralyzed and terrified, tried to process what had happened. And within minutes, among a population armed with cell phones with bad reception, the word began to spread on the streets about the logical possibility of a tsunami.

But this second cataclysm —entirely conceivable in the minds of a population practically accustomed to disaster and with no seismic culture to speak of— fortunately, and for reasons that only nature itself can decree, never came.

The rumor was quickly overtaken by the horrifying reality of massive destruction centered in La Guaira. Certainty trampled uncertainty, and from that point on, Venezuela began to move through its new history —one even more demanding than before, when we had thought that was no longer possible.

But although the Caribbean Sea did not punish us, a many-faceted swell waits watchfully along the shores of our extensive coastline.

A tsunami with many faces. All harsh. All dramatically challenging.

### **Fractured Families: A Social Tsunami.**

Without a doubt, this is the most devastating phenomenon we may face as a nation.

Displaced and incomplete families, without homes or prospects. Without direction. Without answers. Without explanations. Children left orphaned or separated from their relatives, with no outlook that offers any sense of what their future may hold. Mothers abandoned to solitude. Fathers faced with the demanding task of salvaging whatever may remain of a life that, in a matter of seconds, ceased to be.

It is too early to know the true scale of this social tragedy. But the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) already estimates that 1.8 million people require humanitarian assistance as a result of the earthquakes. Of those, 680,000 are children, whose precarious health and housing conditions are compounded by the likely loss of their schools. Although no final official figures are yet available, significant damage to the educational system in the hardest-hit states is to be expected, leaving it without direction. Never before has that expression been more literal.

This is a desolation unprecedented in our recent history. A widespread physical and psychological shock that has left an entire country socially devastated.

## **Post-Traumatic Stress: A Psychological Tsunami.**

No one in Venezuela emerged unscathed from the deadly tremors of June 24. Even those of us who did not suffer the loss of family members or property relive each day, in our minds, the tragedy of so many destroyed homes and experience the emotional consequences of a deeply wounded country.

The long-term psychological effects of this unprecedented situation are still difficult to predict. But it is clear that the trauma caused by the earthquakes and their countless aftershocks, the immeasurable losses of every kind, and the prolonged uncertainty endured by the population is already having immediate consequences that, in the medium and long term, could lead us into a dangerous mental health crisis.

Stress, insomnia, recurring fear, and severe anxiety are some of the most obvious individual signs of a tragedy for which no one is usually prepared. And their paralyzing effects undermine any possibility of setting a course toward recovery —whether personal or national.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has stated that “there is no health without mental health.” As an indivisible part of the well-being we seek, the mind and its care must become an urgent priority if, as a country, we are to move forward.

## **Buried Incomes: An Economic Tsunami.**

Against the backdrop of a volatile and uncertain economic situation, a double earthquake of the magnitude we experienced swept away, in less than a minute, the slim prospects of thousands of families already battered by multiple hardships and the excesses of the country’s enduring political uncertainty.

Domestic tourism, which until now had sustained the day-to-day survival of countless residents of La Guaira —after having been buried 27 years ago beneath the mud of the mudslides— has now collapsed alongside the destroyed buildings, once again shutting the door to a livelihood for an incalculable number of *guaiqueños*.

Businesses wiped out and ventures buried. Unemployment and a lack of income to meet even the most basic needs.

In other states that were structurally less affected, the earthquakes nevertheless further aggravated the already faltering economic system, driving away potential and much-needed investment and delaying even further the long-awaited solutions to a long-standing crisis.

And as a country, we must also reckon with the financial demands involved in beginning to recover, preliminarily estimated by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) at \$37 billion.

An enormous challenge for a state unaccustomed to planning, more devoted to wasteful spending and corruption, and marked by a highly questionable culture of emergency response.

### **Vulnerable Environments: A Public Health Tsunami.**

The simultaneous and instantaneous destruction of hundreds of buildings left thousands of citizens —whose numbers are only beginning to be counted— homeless, giving rise to improvised and inadequate shelters, many supported by international organizations and the unwavering determination of a civil society that organized itself to confront a disaster that overwhelmed us.

As large groups of displaced people rapidly multiplied, particularly in La Guaira, overcrowding followed —and with it, the greatest driver of a public health crisis: the lack of running and safe drinking water.

More than 20,000 people housed in shelters with very limited access to sanitary conditions translates into an exponentially greater risk of diseases typical of these vulnerable environments: gastroenteritis, hepatitis, influenza, pneumonia, bronchitis, COVID-19, dengue fever, and chikungunya. Those traditionally most affected: children and older adults.

And with a hospital system that has always tended toward collapse and inefficiency, with little success in meeting the needs of Venezuela's growing low-income population, this threat becomes a calamity that directly undermines any possibility of responding effectively to the emergency.

Despite the evident assistance provided by global organizations and countries better prepared to confront chaos, the public health emergency appears to be only beginning, and the measures needed to combat it are, at best, only now beginning to take shape.

### **Uncontrolled Waste: An Environmental Tsunami.**

Given the characteristic improvisation of a state accustomed to resolving crises by whatever means, the debris resulting from the fatal collapse of so many occupied buildings —some of them even overcrowded— is beginning to concern the most knowledgeable environmental experts, while also posing a major obstacle to any attempt to emerge from the chaos.

After the tireless work of rescuing survivors, followed by the tragic undertaking of recovering the bodies of those who died —led in many cases, and out of necessity, by the residents of each building themselves— comes the pressing question of what to do with the material remains.

This is not, as one might imagine, a solid mass of reinforced concrete, steel, rebar, and construction blocks. Every collapsed building is an immensely complex, misshapen tangle that also contains glass, household appliances, chemical waste, batteries, plastics, heavy metals, electrical components, minerals, textiles, and decomposing food, among other unexpected forms of waste. The lives of thousands of families compacted into more than two million tons of debris, according to experts' estimates, with nowhere to put it.

Attention is focused on the dangerous proximity of this rubble to the coast of La Guaira and on the misguided expediency and convenience of depositing it directly and quickly into the sea.

Another battle yet to be fought, whose outcome could make a decisive difference to the future of the marine ecosystem along Venezuela's coasts —an intrinsic value that has distinguished us as a Caribbean nation.

## **Democracy and Action**

Venezuelans have traditionally been immersed in contradiction.

We live prepared to move forward amid the endless atmosphere of uncertainty. The incomprehensible is part of our routine, and we stop asking questions to protect ourselves from our own answers.

Thanks to that curious trait of confronting the inexplicable with determination, moments after the earthquake, the resolute cries of family members, neighbors, friends, and strangers could be heard loudly as they used their bare hands to remove debris in search of survivors, answering the cries for help beneath that devastation with fear, but still with enthusiasm.

Ordinary people, with the authenticity of those who take action on foot, chose to act immediately. Without guidance or direction. Without orders from those in power. Without a state. Later joined by the support of brave rescuers from Venezuela and around the world.

The thing is that the greatest value of democracy, in its purest and simplest sense, is the genuine possibility that citizens may decide —but also act. And amid this adversity, more than ever in our recent history, that principle was exercised to the fullest. For even though Venezuelans invoke democracy as an old and foreign formula that seems out of place on our national map, we live it every day like someone inhabiting a borrowed dream, hoping to make it our own.

But the challenge ahead is different. No citizenry can face the enormous waves to come alone. Because one thing is to lend a hand to someone who is drowning, and another is to carry them on your shoulders while swimming forever.

The future appears overwhelming. There are many tsunamis threatening us in the wake of such a deadly double earthquake. And it is deeply dangerous not to prepare ourselves for their arrival.

Venezuela needs to stay afloat. The country is drowning amid a violent swell that barely gives it enough time to catch its breath and keep swimming.

And the useless life preserver appears far too distant. An old, deflated one that has nothing left to give...

## Authors

### ■ Guillermo Ramos Flamerich

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Guillermo Ramos Flamerich is a journalist who graduated from Andrés Bello Catholic University (UCAB) and is a PhD candidate in History at Sorbonne Nouvelle University (Paris), where he also earned a master's degree in Latin American Studies. He works as a researcher, editor, and columnist for outlets such as *Prodavinci* and *Cinco8*, focusing on Venezuela's contemporary political history and the recovery of civic memory.

### ■ Adriana Boersner Herrera

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Adriana Boersner Herrera holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Missouri, where she was a Fulbright Fellow. She earned a bachelor's degree in International Studies from the Central University of Venezuela (UCV) and a master's degree from Simón Bolívar University (USB). She is currently an assistant professor at The Citadel in South Carolina and has served as Senior Researcher for Venezuela at the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). Her research specializes in authoritarian regimes, comparative foreign policy, and relations between Russia and Latin America. Before pursuing her career in the United States, she taught at Metropolitan University (UNIMET), the Central University of Venezuela (UCV), and Simón Bolívar University (USB). She is the author of several academic publications on autocratization and political leadership in Venezuela.

## ■ Irene Carrasquero

Irene Carrasquero is Venezuelan journalist based in Caracas, she holds a bachelor's degree in Mass Media Studies, with a focus in Journalism, from Andrés Bello Catholic University. She worked for 12 years in the Public Affairs Management department at Petróleos de Venezuela, specializing in corporate communications. She has contributed to *Estampas*, a magazine published by the newspaper *El Universal*, and writes an opinion column for *El Pitazo*, titled "Con la mano levantada," through her account @unplanve. She is the author of *Historias a Coletepelo*, a collection of anecdotes, adventures, short stories, and accounts of everyday life. She currently shares her writing through @unpicori, her personal account covering a variety of personal and diverse topics.

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