

The Challenges Facing Venezuela in Achieving a Transition to True and Sustainable Democracy

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Abstract—Venezuelans look like they are learning about democracy, but it's different: they know it, they desire it, and they seek to rebuild it better. But that reconstruction faces a double challenge: bringing justice for serious crimes and, at the same time, envisioning a transition for which there is no blueprint. In this process, 21st-century transitions offer new normative, institutional, and global tools that could make change faster and more demanding. The question is how to bring about that change without repeating the mistakes of the past. That is what we are working on.

I am grateful for the invitation to write about the situation in Venezuela, my country, and also the issue to which I have dedicated more than two decades of work.

A few months ago, Venezuela returned to global headlines following the capture of Nicolás Maduro and Cilia Flores in a U.S. led operation, an event without recent precedent in the region. For years, both had exercised power violently, within a system widely questioned for its legitimacy. The image of Maduro and Flores, who for so long had defied international pressure with brutality, stood in stark contrast to their appearance as defendants in a New York court on drug trafficking charges. That contrast alone could suggest a turning point. The authoritarian system has not yet fully collapsed in Venezuela, but it may be heading toward a transition or at least a change. Of course, Maduro's capture is highly controversial, and we will spend years debating its nature, but understand that for Venezuelans who for years have been imprisoned, tortured, subjected to food and medicine shortages, suffered political persecution, and witnessed the loss of their country, all civil and democratic avenues for bringing about change from within had already been exhausted. The discussion about "international law" and the operation in Venezuela may be a dilemma for the world, but not so much for the Venezuelan victims who for years saw how international law failed them and ended up protecting their jailers and torturers.

However, within the country, the processes are less clear-cut. What is happening in Venezuela cannot be explained solely by that event, because it is part of a longer, more complex,

and still-unfolding trajectory. At its core, it is an attempt at democratic reconstruction whose outcome is not yet clear.

There is one point I consider important to establish from the outset: Venezuela is more than a country that "needs to learn" what democracy or freedom is. It is a country that must rebuild them with new standards. For much of the 20th century, Venezuela had periods with a relatively stable democracy compared to other countries in the region, even before the transitions that later occurred in South America and some parts of Europe. That experience is part of our political memory, although today it has been eroded.

That erosion did not begin with Chavismo. The previous model accumulated deep-seated problems, including systematic corruption, a highly centralized state, and an oil-dependent economy that generated inequalities and distortions that were difficult to sustain. That context allowed for the rise of a political movement that came to power through the electoral process and that, over time, dismantled institutional checks and balances, restricted freedoms, and consolidated an authoritarian system. Chavismo used democracy institutions and a lot of populism to destroy a country.

The consequences of this process are visible on multiple levels: institutional deterioration, a complex humanitarian crisis, repression, and mass migration that has exceeded nine million people in recent years. Nearly a third of the country has left. But that is not the whole story.

Venezuela is also a country where forms of organization, resistance, and civic action persist. At various points during the 27 years of Chavismo, many sectors of society have managed to mobilize, contest electoral spaces, and even expose irregularities or fraud in processes designed to legitimize the regime. That tension between control and resistance continues to define the country's present.

That is why the current challenge is not merely to break free from an authoritarian system. It is to do so without reproducing the conditions that made its rise possible. The transition that many Venezuelans hope for involves political change and also the still-uncertain possibility of building a democracy different from the one that was lost.

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Let's talk about the damage

I would like to focus on some specific elements that help gauge the depth of the damage currently afflicting Venezuelan society. What has accumulated over these years is worse than merely a political or economic crisis. It is, above all, a widespread experience of pain, trauma, and institutional destruction for millions of people.

To speak of Venezuela is to attempt to explain a crisis that, due to its scale, is often difficult to comprehend outside the country. We have not experienced a war or a natural disaster that would justify this level of deterioration. However, the social, economic, and human effects have been comparable to, or even greater than, those of armed conflict. This forces us to acknowledge an uncomfortable truth, the damage caused by sustained political decisions over time can be devastating. Venezuela expelled more migrants than Syria, Ukraine, and any other modern conflict, for example. Venezuela experienced a greater economic contraction than these countries, as its Gross Domestic Product fell by 70% between 2013 and 2019, a decline unmatched by any other country on the planet.

At the same time, the Venezuelan regime and its international allies (Russia, China, Iran, Cuba, North Korea, and Belarus) have constructed a narrative that portrays the country as a victim of external pressures, particularly from the United States and other developed economies. This narrative resonates with certain sectors of global public opinion because it taps into a legitimate sensitivity regarding international inequalities. However, that explanation is, at the very least, incomplete. In fact, it is fake. It is very easy to polarize between rich and poor, North and South, but those formulas do not apply in Venezuela. Authoritarian systems also develop their own economic interests, seek to control resources, and, in that process, can deepen inequality and exclusion within their own societies. This even occurs in brutal ways, as in Venezuela, where corruption has allowed hundreds of billions of dollars to be siphoned off over the years. What has been stolen could have alleviated the country's problems, but they chose not to do so.

In the Venezuelan case, this dynamic has an additional dimension that is not always visible from the outside. Over the years, various reports and investigations have pointed to the consolidation of illicit networks linked to political power. Drug trafficking charges against figures in the Chavista movement, as well as allegations of illegal economies associated with mining, fuel smuggling, or human trafficking, are part of this picture. Organizations such as Transparencia Venezuela have estimated, for example, that the drug trade alone could generate \$8 billion annually for power structures linked to the state. This includes the military. Beyond the exact figures, what matters is

understanding how, in this context, the political, the economic, and the criminal tend to intertwine.

This has significant consequences. On the one hand, it shows that not all conflicts in Venezuela can be understood solely in terms of political competition or citizen participation. On the other, it helps explain why broad sectors of the population have been systematically excluded from public decision-making while mechanisms for resource extraction were consolidated. The looters do not compete in elections; they steal elections and brutally repress the population to continue stealing. They are quick to realign themselves with the United States and whatever country is necessary to remain in power and continue stealing. Chavismo is not united by ideology or revolution; what unites them is control of oil revenues. That is why they do not miss Nicolás Maduro and Cilia Flores. Rather, it suits them for them to remain in prison while the new group in power improves its relations with international organizations and financial systems.

Added to this web of crisis is the deterioration of material living conditions. Venezuela experienced one of the most severe episodes of hyperinflation recorded in recent times, with extreme peaks beginning in 2017 and 2018, without oil sanctions. For years, the population faced widespread shortages of food, medicine, and essential goods, largely due to a highly centralized economic model that controlled production, imports, prices, and access to foreign currency. That system, based on socialist policies, led to long lines to purchase basic goods and a sustained loss of the population's purchasing power.

The collapse of public services further exacerbated this situation. Electricity, water, fuel, and telecommunications, all under state control, have suffered prolonged and recurring failures for two decades, in a context marked by a lack of transparency and accountability. They stole everything. For years, even internet access has been subject to restrictions that hinder the flow of information. In Venezuela, nearly all news websites remain blocked until May 2026, along with platforms such as X [Twitter], Signal, and some VPNs.

Starting in 2019, some of the state's economic control mechanisms began to ease. This coincided with increased international pressure, including sanctions on key sectors such as oil and finance. The government, which publicly denounced these measures, simultaneously allowed a partial opening that breathed new life into the domestic market, greater freedom to import, set prices, and operate in foreign currencies. These changes helped reduce shortages and contain hyperinflation, though without resolving the underlying structural problems. This is what many authors, who prefer to blame the sanctions for the problems caused by Chavismo, usually fail to mention.

By then, however, the social impact was already profound. High levels of poverty, extremely low wages, and massive migration, exceeding nine million people, have transformed daily life. Remember that migration destroys millions of life plans, entrepreneurial ventures, and domestic productive capacity. Losing population means losing a country's greatest wealth, and in Venezuela, almost a third of the country's population has left. Precarity affects not only material conditions but also social relationships, support networks, and expectations for the future. Many personal and collective trajectories have been interrupted.

That is why, when I speak of trauma, I am not referring solely to episodes of repression or specific events, but to a cumulative experience: scarcity, inflation, persecution, contested electoral processes, family separation, and the loss of life prospects. All of this constitutes damage that is not limited to the institutional sphere but runs deep through society.

In this sense, Venezuela's challenge cannot be reduced to a political transition in formal terms. It also involves moral and social reconstruction. Recent experience further demonstrates the risks of concentrating power in a state that manages vast resources, such as oil revenues, without effective oversight mechanisms. Without internal checks and balances or international scrutiny, authoritarian tendencies not only emerge but tend to become entrenched.

The dilemma of changing and delivering justice at the same time

It is necessary to examine the most violent core of Chavismo in recent years, because there lies one of the keys to understanding the Venezuelan dilemma. It also helps explain why, at various times, sectors of society have demanded greater attention and a response from the international community, and why that response was often perceived as insufficient.

When we speak in Venezuela of a demand for justice, we are not referring to an abstraction. We are referring to the accumulation of serious acts, committed systematically and on a large scale, which today preclude any possibility of negotiation, political transition, or legitimate institutional reconstruction.

Various international mechanisms, such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the United Nations, and the International Criminal Court, have documented that a pattern of systematic political persecution has taken root in the country. Millions of people have been singled out, excluded, or affected in their daily lives because of their political stance, losing jobs, access to services, or ties to the state. This type of discrimination has clear precedents. In the early 2000s, following the collection of signatures to trigger

a recall referendum against Hugo Chávez, mechanisms of exclusion were established against those who had participated in that process. A group of victims managed to bring the case before the inter-American system, and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights concluded that political discrimination had occurred. However, there has been no acknowledgment or redress. On the contrary, one of the individuals linked to that process, activist Rocío San Miguel, was detained and subjected to enforced disappearance in 2024, illustrating the persistence of these practices.

Added to this pattern is the systematic use of arbitrary detention. The Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Venezuela, a group of expert investigators appointed by the UN, has documented how individuals perceived as opponents are deprived of their liberty without basic due process guarantees. This includes not only politicians but also union leaders, protesters, journalists, human rights defenders, student leaders, and individuals who serve as democratic role models in their communities. All have been at risk because of their activities. According to these reports, detention conditions include solitary confinement, overcrowding, and, in some cases, the use of unofficial detention centers. At various times, national and international organizations have recorded hundreds and even thousands of people detained for political reasons, distributed across numerous detention centers throughout the country, some of which are clandestine.

The allegations are not limited to detentions. Both the UN mission and bodies of the inter-American system have pointed to the existence of torture, cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, and sexual violence against detainees. These incidents have been documented in public reports and are part of ongoing investigations before international bodies. In some cases, the detention of minors in contexts of protest or political persecution has also been documented, adding a particularly grave element to the overall picture. In 2024, we were able to document the politically motivated imprisonment of more than 220 children. Some of these minors were also beaten, electrocuted, suffocated, drugged, and abused by prison guards, simply because the guards wanted to force them to record videos in which they falsely incriminated themselves and claimed that "the opposition" was paying them to protest.

At the same time, hundreds of cases have been recorded of foreign nationals detained on charges of conspiracy or terrorism. Among them were tourists, humanitarian workers, and people with family ties in the country. These detentions, in many cases, generated discreet diplomatic tensions, but did not always result in strong public statements from the states involved. After Nicolás Maduro's capture, most of these individuals were released, but their testimonies have helped reconstruct what

occurred inside the detention centers. More than 50 remain to be released.

There are also reports of deaths in state custody and possible extrajudicial executions. The case of councilman Fernando Albán, which occurred in 2018, and the death in prison of former minister Raúl Isaiás Baduel, are examples that have been widely questioned by human rights organizations. These cases not only reflect the severity of the abuses but also the limitations on achieving truth and accountability within the country. Baduel died in prison, in the arms of his son, who remains imprisoned in a torture center where he is denied the right to medical care for the injuries accumulating on his body.

This entire set of events presents a difficult dilemma to resolve. The more serious and widespread the crimes are, the more complex it becomes to move toward political agreements that allow for a transition. But at the same time, any transition that bypasses justice runs the risk of lacking legitimacy and leaving intact the conditions that made these abuses possible.

In Venezuela, this dilemma is not theoretical. The victims and their families remain present, organized, and active. They demand recognition, reparations, and guarantees of non-repetition. In some contexts, justice may be delayed, especially when international mechanisms are involved. But denying it does not seem a sustainable option.

For this reason, the discussion about the country's political future cannot be limited to the replacement of one government with another. It also involves deciding what place truth, justice, and memory will occupy in any transition process. The persistence of repressive structures, which have been used to control, deter, and punish dissent, poses clear risks if they are not profoundly transformed.

In this regard, some organizations have described the use of the state apparatus to generate fear and social control as a form of "state terrorism." Beyond the precise legal category, the fact is that the systematic use of public resources to repress and discipline the population has had lasting effects. Even today, Delcy Rodríguez uses them because there has only been a change in Venezuela's leadership, but not in the system. The repressive apparatus remains completely intact and is used at will against anyone. Recognizing this reality is part of the challenge of rebuilding a democracy that, in addition to being formal, is also capable of effectively protecting its citizens.

The difficult part is not escaping the Chavista regime, but how to do so

All of this places Venezuelans before a challenge that has no clear precedent in their recent history. Part of that challenge

also involves an actor who is controversial in the global debate, the United States, particularly the United States under Donald Trump's second administration. Regardless of the opinions that figure generates, the truth is that, in the Venezuelan context, it has been one of the few actors with the real capacity to disrupt the tyrannical grip on power that had taken hold in the country.

Before Maduro's capture, Venezuela had ceased to be an exclusively domestic problem. The scale of migration transformed social and economic dynamics throughout the region. Added to this are forms of official repression that have crossed borders, as well as networks of corruption, drug trafficking, and money laundering with impacts on multiple financial systems around the world. In this context, what happens within Venezuela has effects that extend far beyond its borders and are therefore greater than the capacity of Venezuelan citizens and voters themselves, who are caught up in addressing the economic crisis and the breakdown of public services in the country.

At the same time, Chavismo has forged diverse international alliances, some with authoritarian governments and others with irregular non-state actors, that have contributed to its survival. It has also deployed strategies of political and communicational influence in other countries, relying on networks of ideological affinity, economic cooperation, and, in some cases, financing. These dynamics have helped construct narratives favorable to the regime in international forums, hindering a more complete understanding of what is happening within the country.

This scenario presents the main challenges of the transition. The first of these is the need for sustained international pressure to accompany domestic demands for free, verifiable, and competitive elections. But that pressure, on its own, does not solve the central problem. It must be coordinated with negotiation mechanisms that do not become instruments of blackmail or avenues for consolidating impunity.

Here lies one of the most complex tensions. Impunity cannot be normalized or rewarded, but at the same time, any process of change requires creating incentives for sectors of power to consider a way out viable. Finding that balance is particularly difficult in contexts where the costs of losing political control are extraordinarily high.

Added to this is a recurring debate over the sequence of change. In various forums, the need to prioritize a certain "economic stability" before addressing deeper political transformations is raised. However, from a human rights perspective, this separation is problematic. The Venezuelan experience suggests that stability without political safeguards can end up reinforcing authoritarian structures by facilitating their access to resources and enhancing their external legitimacy without altering their internal practices.

Therefore, rather than choosing between stability or change, the challenge lies in understanding what kind of stability is possible without real institutional transformations. The departure of key figures from power can open up opportunities, but also carries the risk of a reconfiguration of the same system with new actors who adhere to similar logics. Avoiding such continuity is one of the critical points of our process.

In this context, memory plays a central role. It is not merely a matter of remembering, but of establishing a shared framework for understanding what happened. Without this effort, the narratives constructed over the years, which have denied or distorted the magnitude of the abuses, may continue to shape the present. Here, the work of journalists, human rights organizations, and civil society is essential. Documenting, verifying, and narrating what happened is not merely a retrospective exercise, but a prerequisite for building democratic legitimacy.

From the perspective of freedom of expression, this takes on an additional dimension. The ability to speak, investigate, and disseminate information without reprisals is one of the clearest indicators of political openness. In contexts like Venezuela's, where for years there have been documented instances of media control, media closures, and persecution of journalists, the recovery of that space is not a side effect of the transition, but one of its pillars.

In this vein, the development of indicators that allow for the measurement of concrete progress, such as the cessation of persecution, the release of individuals detained for political reasons, or the lifting of restrictions on information, can provide useful tools for evaluating the process beyond mere rhetoric. These elements make it possible to identify real changes even when the overall political landscape remains uncertain.

Finally, there remains a risk that cannot be ignored. The possibility that the current system might adapt, prolong its existence, and reconfigure itself in response to changes in the international environment remains a real one. For this reason, the organization of Venezuelan society, both within and outside the country, continues to be a decisive factor. The rebuilding of political, communicational, and social capacities is part of a process that is still unfolding. Along this path, international support remains necessary, not as a substitute for internal dynamics, but as an element that can help broaden the scope for action and sustain the conditions for a change that is not yet guaranteed.

To conclude with questions

Venezuela, then, is not starting from scratch. It starts from a democratic memory that, though eroded, remains present

in the way millions of people understand freedom, the vote, justice, and dignity. But it also starts from an experience of collapse that compels us to think more carefully about the kind of democracy we want to rebuild. It is not merely a matter of restoring what existed, but of preventing its failures from once again paving the way for new forms of authoritarianism.

In that sense, the Venezuelan transition, if it materializes, will be more than a change of government. It will be a test of how a society confronts accumulated harm without renouncing justice, how it rebuilds institutions without repeating the logic that weakened them, and how it turns the experience of abuse into a line that cannot be crossed again.

From the perspective of human rights and freedom of expression, certain priorities are beginning to take shape, though they are still a work in progress. The first is that openness cannot be measured solely by election results, but also by concrete signs, the end of persecution, the release of those detained for political reasons, and the ability to report and express opinions without fear or censorship. The second is that justice, even if it may take time, must remain the ultimate goal and a condition of legitimacy. And the third is that democratic reconstruction requires an active society, capable of sustaining vigilance, dissent, and memory beyond moments of crisis.

However, even these commitments leave difficult questions open. How does a society negotiate without emptying justice of its meaning? What kind of concessions are acceptable when the cost has been so high? How are lasting agreements built in a society fragmented by exile, inequality, and mistrust? What signs allow us to distinguish between a real transition and an adaptation of the same system in new forms?

There are also questions directed outward. What does it mean to accompany a process like Venezuela's without simplifying or instrumentalizing it? What responsibilities do societies that observe these processes have when their own political, economic, or communication decisions impact them? How can we apply pressure while showing solidarity? There are no definitive answers to these questions. But perhaps that is where part of the shared learning lies among societies that have gone through moments of rupture. Democracy is not consolidated only when it is achieved, but also when it is defended amid uncertainty.

Venezuela is at that point. Between a system of misery that can no longer be sustained and the country yet to be fully built. In that transition, looking at other's experiences is not an exercise in comparison, but a way to expand possibilities, avoid mistakes, and uphold the conviction that even the longest and most painful processes can open new paths. Perhaps the most important question is not how this story ends, but what decisions are made while it is still unfolding.