



Photo credit: A flag is waved during an event where Nicolás Maduro registered as candidate for the presidential election in Venezuela: Testing, Shutterstock, February 2018.

From Populist to Socialist to Authoritarian *Chavismo*: Obstacles and Opportunities for Democratic Change*

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In this essay I will offer some concepts for comprehending the trajectory of and changes in *chavismo* over time, with an eye towards understanding what it is today and how it has survived the domestic and international pressure to which it has been subjected. *Chavismo* is a left populist movement that adopted socialism as its main symbolic discourse during the presidency of Hugo Chávez Frías. Nicolás Maduro's *chavista* government has ceased to be popular, although *chavismo* more broadly and its iconic figure still are. Its discourse can scarcely be recognized as socialist; although anti-imperialist, nationalism is still at its center. Its lack of popularity does not, however, mean the Maduro government is unstable. In analyzing its authoritarian turn, I will point out some sources of its resilience as well as persisting opportunities for democratic change.

From the beginning, *chavismo* has been a *populist* movement.¹ There are, of course, many theorizations of the defining features of populism.² For the purposes of this paper, I will

* I would like to thank Cindy Arnson, Rebecca Hanson, Abe Lowenthal, Michael Penfold, Carlos Torrealba, Alejandro Velasco, and Verónica Zubillaga for comments on previous drafts of this essay.

¹ Ryan Brading, *Populism in Venezuela*, Routledge Studies in Latin American Politics (New York: Routledge, 2013); Kirk A. Hawkins, ed., *Venezuela's Chavismo and Populism in Comparative Perspective* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Margarita López Maya, *El ocaso del chavismo: Venezuela 2005-2015* (Editorial Alfa, 2016).

² Carlos de la Torre and Cynthia Arnson, eds., *Latin American Populism in the Twenty-First Century* (Baltimore, MD: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).



follow those who use Ernesto Laclau’s portrayal of populism as a mobilizing discourse that has a leader identified as the embodiment of the good found in an authentic “people” who are fighting against an evil, conspiring elite.³ Populist movements and governments aim at systematic change and deemphasize pluralism and liberal democratic institutions. From the time of his release from jail in 1994, two years after his failed military uprising, Hugo Chávez mobilized his followers using a discourse that portrayed himself as the representative of “*el pueblo*,” and railed against what he portrayed as a neoliberal, technocratic political elite that dominated Venezuelan politics, in pursuit of its own interests. After assuming the presidency in 1999, the massive popularity of Chávez and his coalition allowed them to rewrite the constitution in a way that they saw as empowering the majority but which reduced safeguards for dissenting minorities. Ratified in power and with a new constitution in hand, from 2000 to 2002, Chávez began to seek change in some of the basic social and economic institutions of Venezuela, including the economy and the state oil company. This generated a wave of conflict from 2002-04 in which the domestic opposition sought to remove Chávez through constitutional and unconstitutional means. These efforts were unsuccessful and ended up weakening the opposition, in part by providing substance for a main tenet of Chávez’s populist discourse: the idea that Venezuela was beset by domestic enemies of the people, conspiring with foreigners.⁴

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One of the attractions of the concept of “populism” among scholars and policy makers is that it is a phenomenon of both the left and the right and thus political ideology does not appear to matter. Indeed, it is common to hear commentators say that populists have no ideology whatsoever. There is some basis to this claim, as populism has a similar structure whether it is left or right; and it usually has a set of root images and symbols, but not an articulated theory (more on this below). However, it is important not to dismiss political ideology completely, as it can

strongly determine the direction and impact of any given case of populism. While Chávez was, from the beginning, eclectic in the discourses he appropriated, there was always a strong element of what we might call left, “Third Worldist” discourse that portrays the problems in the global South as stemming from imperialist relations that not only sap the resources of a

³ See Hawkins, *Venezuela’s Chavismo and Populism in Comparative Perspective*; Robert S. Jansen, *Revolutionizing Repertoires: The Rise of Populist Mobilization in Peru* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

⁴ Laura Gamboa, “Opposition at the Margins: Strategies against the Erosion of Democracy in Colombia and Venezuela,” *Comparative Politics* 49, no. 4 (2017).

country, but also undermine its sovereignty and national unity.⁵ In this perspective, these imperialist relations include not only global capital institutions and the first world states that protect them, but a conspiring domestic elite that represents and collaborates with imperial powers. Lasting solutions to poverty and underdevelopment, then, will come from movements of national liberation that strengthen sovereignty and South-South relations.⁶ Indeed, there was a very clear tendency in the early years of Chávez's presidency to prioritize the incorporation of Venezuela's poor and impoverished sectors, weaken the institutional power of Venezuela's traditionally-dominant social, cultural, economic and political elite, strengthen state-control over global markets, politics and civil society, and increase ties to other nations in the global South and on the margins of Western, democratic countries.

The “Transition to Socialism”

During the campaign for the 2006 presidential elections, Chávez adopted a guiding discourse he called “21st Century Socialism.” Once reelected he announced a “transition to socialism” that was as vague as it was inspiring to followers. The main ideas included greater state control over the economy, including the expropriation of formerly privatized industries such as the CANTV telecommunications company and heavy industries in Bolívar State, a reformulation of state institutions and the development of mechanisms of popular participation, building on the momentum started by the communal councils;⁷ and regional integration.⁸ While many of the economic changes occurred from the beginning of Chávez's second term, in accordance with the powers conveyed through an enabling law, the changes in the state and popular participation were proposed in a constitutional reform that was rejected by citizens at the polls in December 2007. Most of the changes were subsequently passed using the enabling law before it expired in July 2008 as well as in the last months of National Assembly in 2010.

The socialist turn in *chavismo* is often downplayed by analysts because of the vagueness with which the term was used. But such a dismissal neglects an important source of mobilizing power during this period. Adoption of a discourse that suggested that the economy and the state could be different and that the citizenry could participate robustly in public affairs,

⁵ David Smilde, “Participation, Politics and Culture: Emerging Fragments of Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy,” in *Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy: Participation, Politics and Culture under Chávez*, ed. David Smilde and Daniel Hellinger (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁶ Vasant Kumar Bawa, “The Relevance Of Third Worldism In Latin America And South Asia Today,” *World Affairs: The Journal of Interational Issues* 9, no. 2 (2005), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48504885>.

⁷ The communal councils started as neighborhood-based participatory groups that could petition resources from local governments. They became a focus of the Chávez government after 2005 but eventually ceded importance to the “communes,” which were intended to be economic units, larger in scale. See: Matt Wilde, “Contested Spaces: The Communal Councils and Participatory Democracy in Venezuela,” *Latin American Perspectives* 44, no. 1 (2017).

⁸ Gregory Wilpert, “Chávez's Venezuela and 21st Century Socialism,” *Research in Political Economy*, no. 24 (July 2007).



Photo credit: Hugo Chávez in his last presidential campaign: Luis Arismendi, Shutterstock, October 2012.

captured the attention of and succeeded in incorporating sectors that were previously excluded or marginalized.⁹ Research carried out in 2010 by the Centro Gumilla, a Jesuit institution of research and advocacy, found that fully 64 percent of the population embraced some version of the values of socialism.¹⁰ While for most of the population socialism meant something closer to “humanism” and suggested a government that worked on behalf of the people, the term was broad enough to also animate leftist intellectuals and activists inside and outside of Venezuela, who had a more radical understanding of socialism.¹¹ The discourse of socialism articulated in the First Socialist Plan 2007-2013¹² also dictated structural changes in the economy and state that would strongly frame the government that Chávez would leave for Nicolás Maduro.

From 2007 on, efforts to increase state control over the economy increased, as well as efforts to push forward the “social economy” in which cooperative forms of production would

⁹ María Pilar García-Guadilla, “The Incorporation of Popular Sectors and Social Movements in Venezuelan Twenty-First Century Socialism,” in *Reshaping the Political Arena in Latin America: From Resisting Neoliberalism to the Second Incorporation*, ed. Eduardo Silva and Federico M. Rossi (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018).

¹⁰ José Virtuoso S.J., “Hacia el centro y buscando consenso,” *SIC*, no. 723 (2010).

¹¹ See multiple contributions to: Margarita López Maya, ed., *Ideas para Debatir el Socialismo del Siglo XXI*, vol. I (Caracas, Venezuela: Editorial Alfa, 2007); Margarita López Maya, ed., *Ideas para Debatir el Socialismo del Siglo XXI*, vol. II (Caracas, Venezuela: Editorial Alfa, 2009).

¹² Primer Plan Socialista: Desarrollo Económico y Social de la Nación, 2007-2013, (Caracas, Venezuela 2007).

increase in importance.¹³ In 2008, controls over basic functions of the market such as inventories and interest rates were strengthened, and the state expanded its role in agricultural production as well as food processing and distribution. The state deepened its involvement in finance as well, creating five new state banks and nationalizing Banco de Venezuela. It nationalized a significant part of the steel and cement industries, acquiring a dominant position in construction. The government also progressively instituted price controls on about half of all goods and services. The socialist economic laws that were rejected in the December 2007 referendum on constitutional reform were subsequently approved by enabling law or by the lame duck National Assembly in late 2010. The government also nationalized telecommunications company CANTV and sought to use it as a motor of the transition to socialism.

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It was in this period that the Chávez government also strengthened its control over media. In the wake of private media's role in the April 2002 failed coup and the street mobilizations from 2002-04 seeking Chávez's ouster, the government passed the "Social Responsibility in Radio, Television and Electronic Media Law," giving the government control to monitor media content. In 2007 the Chávez government denied the renewal of a license of a leading media outlet: Radio Caracas Televisión. In 2009, it revoked the concessions of 34 private radio stations, giving them to outlets more favorable to the government. By 2013 efforts to buy out critical media outlets like *Ultimas Noticias*, *El Universal*, and Globovisión reached fruition.¹⁴ At the same time, the government greatly increased its investment in state media as well as community media outlets.¹⁵ Part of the "transition to socialism" was a move from policies that sought to sponsor participation to policies that sought to centralize and control participation.¹⁶ While the original communal councils law passed in 2006 ensured some

¹³ This paragraph is based on: José Guerra, *La política económica de los presidentes venezolanos* (Caracas, Venezuela: Dabhar, 2021); José Guerra, *Anatomía de una Catástrofe. Las políticas económicas de los gobiernos de Venezuela, 1920-2020* (Forthcoming); Guerra, *Anatomía de una Catástrofe. Las políticas económicas de los gobiernos de Venezuela, 1920-2020*.

¹⁴ Katelyn Fossett, "How the Venezuelan government made the media into its most powerful ally," *Foreign Policy*, 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/03/11/how-the-venezuelan-government-made-the-media-into-its-most-powerful-ally/>.

¹⁵ Naomi Schiller, "Changing the Channel: Class Conflict, Everyday State Formation, and Television in Venezuela," *Latin American Perspectives* 45, no. 3 (2018).

¹⁶ David Smilde, "Three Stages in the Chávez Government's Approach to Participation," in *Understanding Populism and Political Participation: The Case of Venezuela*, ed. Adam T. Stubits (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Latin American Program, 2009), <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/Venezuela.pdf>.

autonomy, reforms made from 2008-10 subjected the communal councils to greater executive control in the process of working towards a new “communal state.”¹⁷

Maduro was a participant in Chávez’s movement and government from early on and would go on to be elected to and lead the National Assembly. But it was in the turn towards socialism that Maduro’s fortunes increased. His only experience with post-secondary education was his training in the Escuela Nacional de Cuadros Julio Antonio Mella in Cuba, and that gave him a straightforward Leninist understanding of mobilization and governance. He was minister of foreign affairs during Chávez’s entire socialist period and had a strong relationship to the leadership in Cuba. When it became clear that his prospects for surviving cancer were grim, Hugo Chávez returned from his treatment in Cuba in December 2012 to announce that he was naming Maduro as his successor. This was likely based on Maduro’s socialist credentials and his relationship with Cuba.

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The Problem of Charismatic Succession

Hugo Chávez left Maduro with the impossible task of running a country with significant economic distortions—including an overvalued currency, growing inflation and scarcities, declining oil production, and growing debt—while leading a political coalition Chávez had made in his own image—all without Chávez’s charisma. It would soon become clear that under Maduro, *chavismo*’s unique combination of a leftist revolutionary project, vibrant capitalistic private sector, and broadly democratic elections would not last.¹⁸ It was, of course, the last two legs of this stool that suffered the most. In his first months as “president in charge,” Maduro devalued the Venezuelan currency and paid a significant price in public opinion, probably one of the reasons he performed worse than anticipated in the April 2013 snap elections following Chávez’s death. In subsequent years, he would allow exchange rate distortions to reach epic proportions, leading to rampant inflation and corruption, and, in tandem with price controls, to massive contraband and scarcities.

The economic chaos was a major reason that *chavismo* suffered a crushing defeat in the December 2015 National Assembly elections, leaving the opposition with a two thirds

¹⁷ López Maya, *El ocaso del chavismo: Venezuela 2005-2015*.

¹⁸ David Smilde, “The End of *Chavismo*?” *Current History: A Journal of Contemporary World Affairs* 114, no. 769 (February 2015).

majority, enough to possibly remove Maduro from office. While the dazed Maduro government initially accepted the defeat, in the coming weeks and months it circumscribed the powers of the National Assembly. By the end of the month the Supreme Court (TSJ) had suspended the seating of four indigenous representatives due to supposed irregularities. These four included three opposition deputies without which the opposition did not have the two-thirds super-majority that would give them sweeping powers.¹⁹ The opposition swore them in anyway; as a result, the TSJ found the National Assembly to be in contempt of court and declared all of the bills it passed as unconstitutional. In 2017 the Supreme Court tried to assume legislative powers.²⁰ The court subsequently backtracked but announced there would be an election for a National Constituent Assembly. Its installation in August 2017 left the National Assembly as little more than a discursive space for the opposition coalition.²¹

During Maduro's presidency, the government hollowed out Venezuela's electoral institutions to the point that the population had little trust in them and the opposition was perpetually divided about whether to participate in elections. The opposition went unified to legislative elections in December 2015. But in 2016 the National Electoral Council (CNE) cancelled the recall referendum on the most specious of grounds.²² In 2017 the Council approved the election of a constituent assembly without the legally-required referendum, leading the opposition to boycott the July election.²³ They tried to participate in the October 2017 election for governors and were ahead in the polls. But they suffered substantial losses as voters continued to abstain.²⁴ In 2018, the CNE moved up the presidential elections, leaving participants without the legally stipulated time for preparation, and it disqualified a number of the leading parties and politicians. As a result, the principal opposition forces did not participate. Some minority figures and parties did and lost. Most democracies in the

¹⁹ Acceso a la Justicia, "El viacrucis judicial de los diputados de Amazonas," (January 2 2018), <https://accesoaljusticia.org/el-viacrucis-judicial-de-los-diputados-de-amazonas/>.

²⁰ Rafael Romo, "Venezuela's high court dissolves National Assembly," *CNN.com* (2017), <https://www.cnn.com/2017/03/30/americas/venezuela-dissolves-national-assembly/index.html>.

²¹ López Maya, *El ocaso del chavismo: Venezuela 2005-2015*.

²² Hugo Pérez Hernáiz and David Smilde, "Suspension of Venezuela's Recall Process Generates Reactions," *Venezuelan Politics and Human Rights, Washington Office on Latin America*, 2016, <https://www.venezuelablog.org/suspension-of-venezuelas-recall-process-generates/>.

²³ Comisión Internacional de Juristas, *Sin lugar para deliberación: La Asamblea Nacional Constituyente y el desmoronamiento del Estado de Derecho en Venezuela* (Geneva, Switzerland, Julio 2019).

²⁴ Dorothy Kronick and Francisco Rodríguez, "150: Fraud or Fatigue," *Venezuelan Politics and Human Rights, Washington Office on Latin America*, October 26, 2017, <https://www.venezuelablog.org/150-fraud-fatigue/>. The opposition went divided to the regional elections of December 2017, the presidential elections of 2018, and legislative elections of 2020. These divisions responded precisely to differences over whether it is better to participate or boycott unfair elections.

hemisphere and Europe also did not trust Venezuela's elections and regarded Maduro's May 2018 reelection as illegitimate.²⁵

The Venezuelan opposition launched a significant challenge to power in January 2019, when Juan Guaidó, president of the opposition-controlled National Assembly, assumed the interim presidency. The United States followed with devastating sanctions on the oil sector in the hopes of fostering a swift democratic transition. The foreign reserve crunch these sanctions produced led the government to carry out a number of measures; these included the lifting of the exchange controls that had caused so much distortion over the previous 15 years, the flexibilization of price controls and gasoline subsidies, and permitting a de facto dollarization of the economy.²⁶ These changes led to a moderate alleviation of some aspects of the economic crisis. Seeing the results of their economic opening, and with a continued shortage of foreign currency, the government is likely to continue in this direction, seeking to liberalize parts of the economy while maintaining overall control. Parallel and even prior to the implementation of these measures has been a decline in mentions of socialism. During Hugo Chávez's second term and the beginning of the Maduro presidency, socialism was the master metaphor and mentioned continually. Today one can hear entire speeches from Maduro and other government officials in which the term is not even mentioned. Rather, given the greater involvement of the United States and Europe in the conflict since 2019, anti-imperialist discourse has become preeminent.

Authoritarian *Chavismo*

So what is *chavismo* now? Nicolás Maduro's approval ratings currently hover between ten and fifteen percent and no institution of his government reaches twenty percent approval.²⁷ Does it make sense to speak of *unpopular* populism? Hawkins would suggest it does insofar as what makes populism populist is not its popularity but the character of its mobilizing discourse.²⁸ Indeed, the Maduro government still speaks of itself as the embodiment of an authentic "*pueblo*" and still

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²⁵ Geoff Ramsey, "How Venezuela Got Here and What's Next: Q&A on the May 20 Election," *Venezuelan Politics and Human Rights, Washington Office on Latin America*, May 17, 2018, <https://www.venezuelablog.org/venezuela-got-whats-next-qa-may-20-election/>.

²⁶ Francisco Rodríguez, "Sanctions are Driving Iran and Venezuela into Each Other's Arms," *Foreign Policy*, September 17, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/17/iran-teaching-venezuela-maduro-how-to-withstand-us-sanctions/>.

²⁷ *Encuesta Nacional Omnibus, Datanálisis* (Caracas, April 2021).

²⁸ Hawkins, *Venezuela's Chavismo and Populism in Comparative Perspective*, 43.



Photo credit: Nicolás Maduro speaks in an act in support of the Constitutional Assembly: StringerAL, Shutterstock, May 2017.

blames all adversity on conspiring elites, including the political opposition and US foreign policy. It also still tends to portray all dissent as illegitimate, and still speaks of its plans for structural reform, such as the “communal state.” However, the subsidies and price controls that were once central to Twenty-First Century Socialism have largely been set aside. Does it make sense to speak of free-market socialism? If we are to judge by the cases of China and Vietnam, there seems to be no contradiction in practice, even if it is not fully reconcilable in theory. Socialist discourse is no longer the basis of mass mobilizations within Venezuela, but it is still used as a means through which Maduro’s coalition and its supporters speak to one other and their followers about what they are doing. Thus, Venezuela represents a populist government that is not popular, and a socialist project that is increasingly based on the market.

With increasingly tenuous support and facing significant political challenges, the government’s ability to remain in power has only been possible by reducing democratic space.²⁹ In what follows, I will refer to Juan Linz’s and Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan’s classic discussions of authoritarianism, to work through features of the current iteration of *chavismo* in power, in the process discussing opportunities for a return to democracy.³⁰ From the outset, it is important realize that the assumption that leads many policy makers and politicians to suggest that non-democratic forms of government are inherently unstable is an artifact of the “third wave” of transitions to democracy in the last decades of the 20th century, and is largely

²⁹ Javier Corrales and Michael Penfold, *Dragon in the Tropics: The Legacy of Hugo Chávez*, Second edition (Baltimore, MD and Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2015).

³⁰ Juan J. Linz, “An Authoritarian Regime: Spain,” in *Cleavages, Ideologies and Party Systems: Contributions to Comparative Political Sociology*, eds. Allardt and Yrjö Littunen (Helsinki, Finland: The Academic Bookstore, 1964); Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, eds., *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

incorrect. Indeed, one of the motivations of the last fifty years of scholarship on non-democratic forms of governance has been to explain their resilience.³¹ Thus, in thinking about Venezuela, our starting point should be the assumption that Nicolás Maduro's current iteration of *chavismo* is largely stable and resistant to change. Nevertheless, we can see certain still-existing resources and opportunities that could facilitate democratic openings.

One element that distinguishes authoritarianism from totalitarianism is the fact that the latter has an articulated ideology while the former has only a "mentality" that orients its policy. The difference is that an ideology has concepts and analyses that are fairly well developed, while a mentality rests more on root images, metaphors, and sentiments. As suggested above, the ideas of Twenty-First Century Socialism were never fully worked out by *chavismo*; the main efforts to do so came from foreign collaborators such as European political theorists Heinz Dieterich and Juan Carlos Monedero, who ended up running afoul of Chávez precisely at the moments in which their theories would have restrained him in some way.³² *Chavismo* as it developed in practice amounted to an unsteady, not fully consistent set of root images and metaphors. Its primary content is "Third Worldist." In the view of its adherents, *chavismo* is a force that embodies the people and uses Venezuela's natural resources for their well-being; it

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is confronted by a conspiring elite that, in cahoots with foreign powers, seeks to gain control of these resources and crush an otherwise successful socialist project of nationalist liberation. This is straightforward populism and unquestionably anti-pluralistic. And the turn to socialism provided an illiberal rhetoric which discredited the liberal institutions designed to safeguard pluralism. However, there have

always been secondary tendencies in *chavismo* that include valuations of liberal concepts and practices such as electoral democracy and basic civil and political liberties. Thus, while the 1999 Constitution favored direct or participatory democracy and centralized the government, it also contained representative concepts and institutions that were not easily abolished. In addition, the various socialist plans rolled out always recognized the possibility of an opposition, albeit a loyal one. In this sense, *chavismo* is consistent with a long tradition of

³¹ For example, this motivation was expressed by Linz in his original theorization of authoritarianism. See: Linz, "An Authoritarian Regime: Spain;" John Keane also touched on this notion in his recent theorization of the "new despotism." See: John Keane, *The New Despotism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020). See also: Thomas Carothers, "The End of the Transition Paradigm," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 1 (2002).

³² Heinz Dieterich, "El día de la ruptura con Hugo Chávez," *Kaosenlared.net*, August 15, 2011, 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160304191152/http://old.kaosenlared.net/noticia/dia-de-ruptura-con-hugo-chavez>; Juan Carlos Monedero, "Venezuela: El Discurso Mágico de una Revolución Particular" (paper presented at the Congreso Internacional de América Latina, XV Encuentro de Latinoamericanistas Españoles, Madrid, Spain, 2012).

popular leftism in Venezuela which tends to include liberal alongside radical values.³³ The ideas and metaphors of *chavismo* are not consistent; nor are they developed enough to be considered an ideology, as would be the case in a totalitarian context. But they do provide an outlook, in that the simple desire of the leader is not enough justification for government action and policies, as would be the case in “sultanism.” *Chavismo* tends to go to great lengths to describe its proposals and actions in terms of its own basic tropes and images.

These tropes and images have some staying power because of the enduring charisma and popularity of Chávez.³⁴ In a context in which no living Venezuelan political leader reaches 20 percent support, and two-thirds of the population say they are politically unaligned, Chávez routinely surpasses 60 percent approval rates.³⁵ Chávez’s popularity provides a resource for Maduro as well as an indicator of the limits of his success. A group of researchers from the Frente Amplio Venezuela Libre suggests that members of his coalition and its bases give Maduro the benefit of the doubt because Chávez selected him and because he has been revalidated in what they see as legitimate elections. *Chavistas* see themselves as fighting an epic battle of anti-imperialist resistance, trying to preserve the nation and a revolution that prioritizes social inclusion

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A second characteristic of an authoritarian regime, and which distinguishes it from a totalitarian context, is limited pluralism. Venezuela is a less pluralist society today than it was twenty years ago, as a result of government repression of opposition parties and politicians and ever-greater control over the economy, media, and education. However, organized religion, organized labor, organized civil society, and opposition political parties that operate independently still exist in

Venezuelan society. In 2021 a civil society coalition that includes social movements, non-governmental organizations, organized religion, organized labor and business associations provided a small breakthrough in submitting nominations for National Electoral Council rectorships, four of which were eventually accepted. It was this breakthrough that sparked new momentum towards negotiations in the following months. Surveillance, censorship, and harassment of independent media definitely reduces but has not eliminated the influence of the non-governmental sector. Much of the Venezuelan economy is still in the hands of private

³³ Alejandro Velasco, *Barrio Rising: Urban Popular Politics and the Making of Modern Venezuela* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

³⁴ Caitlin Andrews-Lee, “The Politics of Succession in Charismatic Movements: Routinization versus Revival in Argentina, Venezuela, and Peru,” *Comparative Politics* 52, no. 2 (2020).

³⁵ *Encuesta Nacional Ómnibus--Abril 2021*, Datanálisis (Caracas, 2021).



Photo credit: Hugo Chávez in his last presidential campaign: Luis Arismendi, Shutterstock, October 2012.

capital, even though a large segment of it is dependent on the government. Venezuelan society still has significant social and cultural pluralism, which includes a deeply ingrained democratic culture that has resisted *chavismo*'s efforts at cooptation.

The current configuration of governance is also characteristically authoritarian. While Maduro is now the undisputed leader of *chavismo*, he is far from having absolute power, as would be the case in a totalitarian regime; nor does he have unlimited, personalistic, arbitrary power as would be the case in a sultanistic regime. The original “troika” of Maduro, former Socialist Party (PSUV) vice president Diosdado Cabello, and former oil minister Rafael Ramírez has evolved into a lesser but still important configuration in which Communications Minister Jorge Rodríguez and Vice President Delcy Rodríguez have replaced Ramírez as the relatively more sophisticated, technocratic leaders. Furthermore, Maduro has come to rely on the Socialist Party (PSUV) and the armed forces to a greater degree than Chávez ever did.³⁶ While it is not always clear whether it is Maduro controlling the armed forces or vice versa, Maduro has been able to construct a situation in which the armed forces have enormous economic benefits and the same high exit costs as the rest of government leaders in the event of a democratic transition. The sheer number of military officials in government positions is also an important characteristic of an authoritarian government.

The classic analyses of transitions from authoritarian regimes suggest a key element is the development of linkages between regime moderates and opposition moderates. If these two sectors can keep hardliners on each side at bay, forge agreements, and build social and

³⁶ Corrales and Penfold, *Dragon in the Tropics*.

political capital, momentum for change can develop.³⁷ Within *chavismo* there is, of course, a great variety of officials with different outlooks and prospects; many have serious doubts about the sustainability of the regime. But the meaning of these doubts for any given official depends on how compromised they are by instances of corruption or human rights abuses and where they are in their careers. It is not the same to be a 35-year-old official, with no accusations leveled against him or her and looking ahead to the next 35 years of life and politics, as it is to be a 60-year-old official for whom there are international arrest warrants. The former can easily imagine a future without the Maduro regime. The latter is undoubtedly ready to go down with the ship. Maduro has assiduously sought to prevent the development of autonomous cadres within the government, consolidating control over the state apparatus through repeated purges of critics and competitors. The bleak fates of those who have attempted to strike an independent line speak loudly to any who might consider it.³⁸

The maximalist discourse and actions of the Juan Guaidó-led opposition and its main international ally, the United States, led government officials to circle the wagons, seeking safety in unity. The opposition's attempt to generate a military uprising on April 30, 2019, apparent involvement in a mercenary attack in May 2020,³⁹ and repeated calls for international military action,⁴⁰ have not demonstrated tolerant opposition that seeks co-existence. Likewise, the Trump administration's frequent suggestions that military options were on the table and the indictments of the regime's highest authorities, including Maduro himself, on drug trafficking and other charges, make it reasonable for government officials to believe that the costs of democratization are high.

In addition, the Maduro government has constructed a network of international alliances that has allowed it to survive international pressure. *Chavismo's* character as a Third Worldist project seeking to promote a multi-polar world has allowed it to forge links with major extra-hemispheric powers such as Russia, China, and Turkey, as well as the Non-Aligned Movement (of which Nicolás Maduro was chair from 2016-19). These alliances have allowed it to maintain and develop its military, skirt sanctions, and gain support in international

³⁷ Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter, *Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

³⁸ None has been able to strike an independent line from within the government. The results of these efforts range from those who have been actively marginalized (such as former ministers Jorge Giordani, Héctor Navarro, and Elías Jaua), to those who have been imprisoned (former ministers Raúl Baduel and Miguel Torres), to those who have fled and been well-received outside the country (Attorney General Luisa Ortega Díaz and former intelligence chief Cristopher Figuera), to those pursued by U.S. justice (former intelligence chief Hugo Carvajal).

³⁹ Kejal Vyas and Juan Ferrero, "Venezuelan Opposition Guru Led Planning to Topple Maduro," *Wall Street Journal*, June 26, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/venezuelan-opposition-guru-led-planning-to-topple-maduro-11593163801>.

⁴⁰ José de Cordoba and Ryan Dube, "Maduro's Opposition Urges Military Force in Venezuela," *Wall Street Journal*, February 24, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/venezuela-opposition-calls-for-consideration-of-force-against-regime-11551040222>.

forums such as the United Nations and the Organization of American States.⁴¹ The strength of these alliances is often overestimated and experts suggest that if their interests are taken into account, they would not prevent democratic change in Venezuela.⁴²

The last important characteristic to consider is the relatively low social and political mobilization that characterizes contemporary Venezuelan society. For most of its time in power, *chavismo* correctly perceived itself as the majority but incorrectly assumed it would be so forever. It thus sought to have electoral institutions and machinery that were trustworthy enough to guarantee that its electoral wins would be recognized nationally and internationally. That changed with the stinging defeat suffered in the 2015 legislative elections. But by 2017, the regime found an effective strategy to confront the fact that it had minority support, using obnoxious actions by the National Electoral Council to divide opposition leaders, with some calling for a vote and others calling for boycotts. Thus, on the one hand, from 2017 to the present, partial boycotts have allowed the government to drive down opposition participation. On the other hand, *chavismo* disproportionately turns its own people out through its strategy of “red points” in which government supporters are asked to register that they voted. This strategy generates concerns among people regarding the secrecy of the vote and the potential loss of the government benefits they depend on.⁴³

This low level of electoral, street, and communicative mobilization is arguably the most important hurdle to democratic change in Venezuela today. However, it is also likely the easiest to turn around.

Street mobilizations have also diminished on all sides. While Chávez frequently drew hundreds of thousands into the streets, under Maduro mobilizations are infrequent—usually organized as responses to opposition events—and ever more sparsely attended. While the 2017 protest wave against the election of a National Constituent Assembly was massive, the opposition has not been able to lead significant street mobilizations against the government since then, with the exception of a few weeks in January and February of 2019. This is in part because of the opposition’s own strategic failures. But it is mainly because of government repression, including not only state security agents with state-of-the-art anti-riot equipment and vehicles, but armed para-state actors—often glossed as “*colectivos*”—who violently act

⁴¹ Corrales and Penfold, *Dragon in the Tropics*. On the importance of international alliances for the “new despotisms,” see Keane, *The New Despotism*.

⁴² Cynthia J. Arnson, ed., *Venezuela's Authoritarian Allies: The Ties that Bind?* Latin American Program Reports on the Americas, No. 43 (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2021), <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/venezuelas-authoritarian-allies-ties-bind-no-43>.

⁴³ Daniel García Marco, “Elecciones en Venezuela: qué son los puntos rojos y por qué Henri Falcón acusa a Maduro de ‘compra de votos,’” *BBC Mundo*, May 21, 2018; Michael Penfold, *Food, Technology, and Authoritarianism in Venezuela's Elections* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Latin American Program, 2018), <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/food-technology-and-authoritarianism-venezuelas-elections>.

against protests. This is one of the reasons that historian Margarita López Maya considers the Maduro regime a case of sultanistic authoritarianism.⁴⁴

There are additional characteristics of contemporary life in Venezuela that create a context in which there is little debate, discussion, or politics of any kind.⁴⁵ Judicial harassment and pursuit of opposition politicians has sent many of them into exile, making them largely irrelevant within Venezuela. Repression of independent media and monitoring and manipulation of social media⁴⁶ has

Chavista discourse still includes ample mentions of liberal democratic values and practices, such as fair elections and respect for pluralism. Even if *chavismo's* actual track record on these issues is poor, the concepts themselves have not been rejected altogether.

included outright censorship and led to self-censorship that mutes public criticism and alternative interpretations of Venezuelan politics. Finally, we must consider the impact of the immiseration of the population, first by the Maduro government's economic mismanagement and corruption and more recently by the impact of U.S. economic sanctions.⁴⁷ From 2012 to 2020 the Venezuelan economy has contracted by almost seventy percent,⁴⁸ leading to the out-migration of over five million Venezuelans. Those who stay are increasingly dependent on the government distribution of subsidized food, even though the reach and frequency of this program have diminished since 2018. In contrast, dollarization has provided relief for some but largely leads people to spend their time trying to figure out how to navigate the new context, rather than exercise their civil and political liberties.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Margarita López Maya, *Democracia para Venezuela: ¿representativa, participativa o populista?* (Caracas, Venezuela: Editorial Alfa, 2021).

⁴⁵ Hugo Prieto, "David Smilde: 'Nunca he visto un momento tan desprovisto de debate, discusión y política,'" *Prodavinci*, January 31, 2021, <https://prodavinci.com/david-smilde-nunca-he-visto-un-momento-tan-desprovisto-de-debate-discusion-y-politica/>.

⁴⁶ Iria Puyosa, "Political control on the Internet in the context of a hybrid regime: Venezuela 2007-2015," *Revista Teknokultura* 12, no. 3 (2015).

⁴⁷ Luis Oliveros, *Impacto de las Sanciones Financieras y Petroleras sobre la Economía Venezolana*, Washington Office on Latin America (Washington, DC, 2020), <https://www.wola.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Oliveros-informe-completo-2.pdf>.

⁴⁸ Francisco Rodríguez, *Tackling Venezuela's Humanitarian Crisis: Mobilizing Resources through a Political Agreement* (Oil For Venezuela, 2021), <https://en.oilforvenezuela.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/OIL-FOR-VENEZUELA-2021-1.pdf>.

⁴⁹ This is a good place to remember that emotive and ideological motives for assent to domination are often less important than straightforward material calculation. See Linz, "An Authoritarian Regime: Spain;" and Wolfgang Schluchter, *The Rise of Western Rationalism: Max Weber's Developmental History*, trans. Guenther Roth (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981).

This low level of electoral, street, and communicative mobilization is arguably the most important hurdle to democratic change in Venezuela today. However, it is also likely the easiest to turn around. Polls show that Venezuelans want to vote; and if they had candidates and an electoral authority they trusted, they would turn out in massive numbers. And if the economy were to grow again due to dollarization, remittances from abroad, or sanctions relief, there would soon be a citizenry able to lift its head from a focus on basic necessities and instead mobilize to demand change. The communicative landscape is ever more impoverished; but social media use is still widespread and digital news platforms have proliferated.

Conclusion

In sum, *chavismo* is a Third Worldist version of left populism that has lost potency but still serves as the guiding vision of a now authoritarian government. It has resisted pressure for change by relying on Chávez’s enduring charisma, preventing the emergence of autonomous moderates, developing international alliances, undermining electoral and street mobilization, and shutting down discussion and debate by repressing opposition politicians and media and immiserating the population. Our starting assumption in analyzing such an authoritarian context should be stability, not change. However, there are still spaces and resources that provide opportunities for working for a return to democracy. *Chavista* discourse still includes ample mentions of liberal democratic values and practices, such as fair elections and respect for pluralism. Even if *chavismo*’s actual track record on these issues is poor, the concepts themselves have not been rejected altogether. More broadly, there is still political, economic, social and cultural pluralism within Venezuelan society, something that provides an alternative to an authoritarian regime. People who identify with Chávez but reject the Maduro government⁵⁰ do so, at least in part, because of its authoritarian slide, suggesting that liberal democratic sentiments continue to exist in that segment of the population. Furthermore, while Maduro has a firm grip on most aspects of his coalition, there is actually a plurality of leadership. Partial agreements regarding humanitarian efforts and democratic spaces could develop social and political capital between moderates in the regime and the opposition, marginalizing hardliners and changing the geometry of Venezuela’s conflict in ways that could permit the emergence of a broad opposition coalition that pushes forward an inclusive agenda.

About the Author

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⁵⁰ *Encuesta Nacional Ómnibus--Abril 2021.*