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Venezuela's Elusive Transition: Toward a New Path

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Notwithstanding the recent flurry of news regarding the possibility of new negotiations between the government of Venezuela, led by President Nicolás Maduro, and the rival administration headed by Juan Guaidó, the former president of the National Assembly who was appointed interim president by the Assembly in January 2019, Venezuela in August 2021 still appears to be far from an end to authoritarian rule. More than five million Venezuelans—15 to 20 percent of the population—have fled as the country has suffered catastrophic economic, social, and institutional deterioration. Polls show that a strong majority of Venezuelan citizens disapprove of the Maduro government, yet it nonetheless remains entrenched.¹ Most Venezuelans have become skeptical that any political change will occur in the foreseeable future, and have therefore focused their energies on their own health and survival, rather than on politics.

Demonstrations, boycotts, and occasional bursts of electoral support for the opposition have not substantially weakened the Maduro government's hold on power. Broad and targeted individual and secondary economic sanctions by the United States and other foreign governments have failed to loosen its grip. The widespread diplomatic recognition in the Americas and Europe of Guaidó as the country's constitutional president also failed to dislodge Maduro. Perhaps this was because Guaidó does not control any Venezuelan territory nor any government programs, armed forces, or police—and because the Assembly that designated him interim president in 2019 is no longer in place. Fewer than ten of the nearly sixty nations that once recognized Guaidó's self-proclaimed "government" still maintain that recognition.



Why have Venezuelan democrats and members of the international community made so little headway in challenging authoritarian rule? How could they become more effective in helping the Venezuelan people establish effective democratic governance? What might both parties learn by considering how other countries ended autocratic rule and constructed (or reconstructed) democratic governance, and examining why their own approaches have thus far failed? Can the Venezuelan opposition and the international community develop new, more viable strategies to aid Venezuela in strengthening its political institutions, reviving its reeling economy, and achieving equitable social progress?

Successful efforts to displace authoritarian governments generally unite the opposition while also reinforcing divisions within the authoritarian coalition.

To address these questions, this essay draws upon many interviews and seminars and the extensive academic literature on Venezuela; but also, importantly, on the classic studies of democratic transitions from autocratic rule in the late 20th century conducted by Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe Schmitter, Laurence

Whitehead, and their colleagues at the Wilson Center in the 1980s; and on the retrospective analyses of nine successful democratic transitions that Sergio Bitar and I did almost a decade ago.² In each of these diverse cases, opposition movements succeeded against difficult odds in achieving democratic transitions away from entrenched authoritarian rule. The histories of these transitions are worth consulting in considering Venezuela's own unique challenges.

Recurrent Elements of Previous Transitions from Authoritarian Rule to Democracy

Successful transitions from authoritarianism toward democracy have had different starting points, paths toward transformation, and precise outcomes, yet all have experienced four challenges inherent in democratic transitions (if not always necessarily in the same sequence).

Preparing for the End of Authoritarian Rule

Domestic forces seeking to replace an authoritarian government must gain enough popular support and national and international legitimacy to challenge the autocracy and become plausible contenders for national power. Opposition movements can also situate themselves to become viable interlocutors for those within the authoritarian coalition who may be actively seeking, or at least be amenable to, an exit strategy.

Achieving such goals through political demands and social mobilization in the face of

centralized power, vested interests, and the risk of public disenchantment requires an honest evaluation of the motives, strategies, assets, vulnerabilities, and behavior of diverse sectors of the ruling regime and its supporters, and a similarly objective assessment of the opposition's own assets, weaknesses, factions and strategies. It also requires bridging disagreements among diverse sectors of the opposition coalition regarding goals, policies, and leadership in order to present a united alternative to the government. Successful efforts to displace authoritarian governments generally unite the opposition while also reinforcing divisions within the authoritarian coalition. Even when these goals seem distant, they have often been achieved over time through persistent, disciplined efforts.

Authoritarian governments—with their control over key resources and their ability to use incentives and coercion to coopt, intimidate, and repress opponents—often appear invulnerable until the moment of their collapse. While they are in the saddle, autocrats reward loyalists and coopt opportunists, aiming to disorient and divide the opposition. If and when the regime itself begins to decay or divide—and if and when a coherent opposition emerges with an attractive vision, a realistic strategy, and genuine popular credibility—the remote prospect of ending authoritarian rule can become more likely, yet still be far from inevitable.

Weakening the Authoritarian Incumbents

An authoritarian government will typically avoid relinquishing or even sharing power until at least one of its bedrock factions determines that doing so may be necessary to avoid major unwanted consequences: e.g., a severe loss of public support, civil violence, a split within the armed forces, economic devastation, international ostracism and/or crippling sanctions, or threats to the nation's territorial integrity. The embarrassment of military defeat, the costs of politicizing professional security forces, economic calamity, or electoral humiliation may at times hasten an autocracy's exit, but usually only when a segment of the established government tolerates or openly supports opposition calls for political liberalization.

Opposition forces must articulate positions that encourage some within the authoritarian government to be open to change. This may well require assurances that a campaign of retribution will not be undertaken against the current rulers and their supporters, and that their personal and institutional economic interests will be respected under law and democratic rule. Reconciling such assurances with the aspirations and resentments of long excluded and repressed members of the opposition coalition is a difficult balance to strike, but likely to be necessary.³



Managing the Transfer of Power

A successful democratic transition requires dealing with complex, interconnected tensions and dilemmas. Those aiming to assume power must foster civic order and limit violence while striving to ensure that all security and intelligence forces—including those implicated in state repression under the previous authoritarian regime—will henceforth act within the law. They must also hasten to disband—and, if possible, disarm—irregular forces operating outside the law and the democratic political arena. They must both inspire domestic trust and gain international legitimacy. This will usually involve the development of reliable electoral procedures and institutions to ensure that people can vote freely; that their votes will be faithfully recorded, monitored, and respected; and that key minorities and their core interests will be legally protected.

Those pushing for a democratic transition must also be adequately prepared, technically and politically, for their new responsibilities. This may require retaining some officials from the outgoing administration, despite their having worked closely with the autocratic regime, thus resisting the pressure and temptation to “clean house” while also attracting back some administrative and technical experts from the diaspora and accelerating the training of new personnel.

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Governance requires perspectives and competencies distinct from those exercised while in opposition, and the reconciliation of inherent tensions. Over the course of transition, new authorities must balance the need for bureaucratic, technocratic, security, and judicial expertise with the impulse to purge incumbents. They must redirect the civilian bureaucracy, and all security and police forces, away from controlling subjects and toward protecting and serving citizens. They need to convince citizens, in turn, to begin trusting a state that most will quite understandably reject or approach with wariness; and to encourage investors to take prudent risks in order to rebuild the economy.

Transitional democratic authorities must balance the imperatives of responding to those individuals and communities that suffered human rights abuses, and holding accountable those who committed gross violations, with assuring the discipline, morale, and effectiveness of established security forces. Security forces must convince citizens that they can deal with crime and violence—and, in some cases, separatist movements—and that they will not revert to repression. Political figures, high-level security officers, respected civic, business and labor

leaders, representatives of faith communities, and cultural personalities should emphasize the virtues of mutual toleration and coexistence among bitter former enemies—no easy task, but one that can be achieved, at least partially, with efforts to do so over time.

The new authorities will typically inherit long-standing practices of corruption and impunity that reflect what the authoritarian leaders have done to build and maintain support and, in some cases, to accumulate personal wealth. They must rebuild the national economy while buttressing regulatory authorities and independent judiciaries that can hold national and local executives accountable, and they must disempower those officials and institutions that would otherwise block all efforts to support transparency and accountability.

Democratic transitions are rarely, if ever, easy or quick; on the contrary, most take many years and suffer various setbacks. There are no “magic bullets” for success, but history suggests that heeding several important principles may improve the chances to navigate the myriad obstacles that will arise along a path from autocracy to democracy.

Imperatives for Achieving Democratic Transitions: Lessons from Past Experiences

1. Move Forward Incrementally

Leaders of successful democratic transitions usually prioritize gaining ground whenever and wherever possible—even when some objectives can only be partly achieved, and when some of their supporters demand maximalist action.

They pursue long-term strategies, develop new points of leverage, and constantly seek further opportunities to advance. They do not expect quick and total victory or promise too much, too soon. They are ready to propose and/or accept imperfect compromises that move in a desirable direction in order to enhance leverage toward achieving more satisfactory accords. Such compromises may require greater tenacity and skill than rejecting concessions outright on the basis of principle. Intransigent adherence to maximalist positions rarely succeeds.

It is important to build bridges with open-minded elements within the ruling circle and in other power centers and to focus sharply on what unites people rather than what divides them. This requires being open to engaging with people who may have previously been inclined to support the incumbent regime.



2. Project a Positive and Inclusive Vision

Opposition leaders should credibly project, in broad strokes, a consistently positive vision of what kind of future they are seeking. They should emphasize progress rather than dwell on past grievances, and should acknowledge the inevitability of sacrifice, compromise, and imperfection. Communicating attractive, inclusionary, and feasible goals, and taking concrete steps toward them, can counter the pervasive fear and passivity that may otherwise demobilize social organizations, opposition parties, and individuals. A compelling vision that includes both medium- and long-term goals can sustain transitions from authoritarian rule through periods of stress and stagnation.

3. Build Convergence and Coalitions

It is critical for an opposition movement to encourage convergence, build coalitions, and fashion alliances with different opposition factions and unaligned forces. It is essential to connect opposition actors with social movements including trade unions, student federations, women's organizations, human rights groups, and religious institutions. Establishing coalitions requires taking the time to cultivate patient consultation and deliberation aimed at building broad, popular confidence that the movement for democracy is not merely a vehicle for advancing the interests of particular individuals or groups. It is important to build bridges with open-minded elements within the ruling circle and in other power centers and to focus sharply on what unites people rather than what divides them. This requires being open to engaging with people who may have previously been inclined to support the incumbent regime.

It is also necessary to reconcile—or sometimes, to choose between—the views of opposition leaders in exile and those still within the country.⁴ Those in exile often make demands that exceed what those in the country think feasible or productive. International actors should not favor diaspora groups just because they are more accessible and familiar; they are often imperfect guides to a country from which they are alienated.

4. Create and Protect Spaces for Dialogue

Prior transitions show how critical it is to create and protect spaces for direct and confidential dialogue among opposition groups, and between them and those in or close to the incumbent government. Such dialogues can facilitate improved understanding of different perspectives, and develop familiarity and sometimes even some degree of trust among participants.

“Dialogue,” correctly understood, is a technique for building and reinforcing effective

communication. It should not be mistaken for a means by which one party seeks to convince the other of their own righteousness, or to wrest concessions as a prerequisite for further exchanges. The confidentiality of such discussions should be firmly protected. It is not a sign of patriotic loyalty to reject opportunities to exchange ideas across the divide between incumbents and their challengers.

In conducting dialogue, listening well is more important than grandiloquent proclamation. Clear statements, respectful questions, and constructive responses, communicated in an empathetic way, are crucial to constructive dialogue. It can be helpful to propose steps that respond to expressed concerns of the other party and can be feasibly implemented at a reasonable cost; such moves can elicit reciprocity and build momentum for future negotiation. Setting forth mutually desired objectives can motivate both sides, even if the path to achieve them cannot yet be fully articulated. Discrediting a mediator or neutral third party for not favoring one's side misconceives the purposes of dialogue and can undermine or retard prospects for success.

Serious, productive dialogue occurs only when significant elements of both the government and the opposition recognize that important objectives may be achievable, at acceptable cost and risk, through agreements from which both sides can ultimately gain. In advocating for such negotiations, the opposition needs to make reasonable demands, encourage popular pressure geared toward the realization of such demands, and mobilize international support. The proper aims of dialogue and negotiation are to create and reinforce pathways toward reducing the areas of recurring conflict, not to demand or dictate terms of surrender. It is self-defeating to depict those who are committed to engaging in this process as suspect or traitors.⁵

It is critical to acknowledge the need for truth, justice, and accountability, while also providing assurances of personal safety to those relinquishing power.

5. Establish Civilian Control of the Military, Police, and Intelligence Services

From the beginning of the process of democratic transition—although this cannot be achieved immediately—it is imperative to aim to bring the armed forces, police, and intelligence agencies under civilian control, and to disband irregular forces and vigilante groups. At the same time, it is vital to recognize the legitimate role of security forces and agencies, their appropriate claims to some level of resources, and their personnel's need to be protected from reprisal. Such provisions will provoke concern and anger among many people who may themselves have been victimized by these same institutions; it is important to address this conflict through modes of transitional justice.

6. Foster Transitional and Transformational Justice and Collective Memory

Transitions produce strong popular pressure to hold members of the former authoritarian regime accountable for human rights violations, blatant corruption, and other abuses. It is critical to acknowledge the need for truth, justice, and accountability, while also providing assurances of personal safety to those relinquishing power.⁶ This requires rejecting calls for the wholesale prosecution of former officials; establishing transparent legal processes for determining and recounting, to the extent possible, the truth regarding human rights violations and other flagrant abuses; providing recognition and perhaps reparations to victims; cultivating popular “collective memory” regarding the excesses of the authoritarian era; and, when prudent, bringing major perpetrators to justice.

There is no simple formula for handling these complex and sensitive issues, but keys are to emphasize the acknowledgment of victims, enact concrete measures to prevent future violations, and work to avoid a cycle of revenge. The best way to build peaceful and effective reconciliation processes is to develop them through give-and-take among the outgoing regime (including security forces), the democratic opposition, victims and their families, and civil society organizations. This requires commitment, leadership, empathy, and some flexibility, but the transitional justice mechanisms employed in Brazil, Chile, and South Africa during their extended democratic transitions show what can be achieved even in highly polarized societies.

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Over the course of a transition to democracy, the recognized options for achieving peaceful coexistence must be expanded beyond amnesty or amnesia, on the one hand, and revenge or reprisal on the other. It is more important to reach agreement on the principles and procedures by which standards of justice will be protected and victims of injustice will be acknowledged, as well as by which political power can be achieved and challenged, than to specify in advance all the precise details of political representation, the specific responsibilities of human rights organizations, and the particular modes of civilian control of security forces.

7. Mobilize Effective External Support

External actors—foreign governments; international, intergovernmental, and multilateral institutions; corporations, trade unions, religious organizations, international federations of

political parties, professional associations, women’s groups, and other nongovernmental entities—can effectively lend support to the democratic transition process, but they should respect the primacy of local actors. Democracy requires self-determination, not external imposition. External support for democratization is more likely to be effective when it is strategically imported, not exported. External actors can provide the venues and set the conditions for confidential dialogue among opposition leaders, and then for eventual negotiations between representatives of the opposition and of the authoritarian government.⁷

They may also offer access to international expertise on a range of practical issues—from electoral campaigns to effective media strategies, conducting polls, and monitoring and securing elections—while providing educational and networking opportunities. Concerted external pressure, including targeted economic sanctions, can sometimes help curb repression of human rights and protect the lives and rights of opposition leaders. Strategic offers of trade, investment, aid, and other forms of cooperation, designed to reinforce and facilitate democratic transition, can be more effective than punitive sanctions. International economic assistance to respond to social and economic crises during the transition period and to encourage economic reconstruction can be crucial when it is provided in response to local needs, in cooperation with local actors, and leaves policy choices to local leaders. Examples abound of such constructive contributions to democratic transitions by diverse international actors, as in the cases of Chile, South Africa, Poland, Ghana, and the Philippines, among others.

8. Encourage International Cooperation

Partisans on both sides, who are struggling to shape the future of their nation, should urge outside powers not to create or reinforce obstacles to a peaceful resolution of their country’s internal conflicts, but rather to consider whether and how the core interests of foreign powers can be reconciled in ways that bolster self-determination and reconstruction in the country experiencing transition. This approach may require challenging familiar mindsets, as well as good faith engagement by multiple international powers that have conflicting—but perhaps, also compatible—interests.

Rethinking Opposition Strategies

Progress toward an eventual transition from authoritarian rule to democratic governance in Venezuela will require the development and implementation of new strategies by the opposition and by their external supporters, as well as by the incumbent Maduro government.⁸ Venezuela’s diverse opposition groups must fundamentally improve their understanding of the *chavistas*’ enduring appeal among varied sectors of Venezuelan society, their political priorities and core



Photo credit: Citizens participate in a mobilization on Workers' Day in Caracas, Venezuela: StringerAL, Shutterstock, May 2018

interests, and their capacity to survive and remain in power. The Venezuelan opposition and their international supporters must also focus self-critically on how their own approach may have contributed to *chavismo*'s staying power. They must analyze and understand why Hugo Chávez was so popular and still retains solid support; and why the majority of Venezuelans today disapprove of the Maduro government but are also quite critical of the Venezuelan opposition. It will take thoughtful soul-searching by diverse opposition factions and their international backers and by members and supporters of the autocratic regime to gradually move toward fruitful political negotiations that can end authoritarian rule and establish inclusive democracy in Venezuela.

Understanding the Rise and Appeal of Chavismo

Chávez reached the Venezuelan presidency not by force, subterfuge, or mere chance, but rather because he understood the drastic deterioration of Venezuela's democratic institutions and national economy during the 1980s and 1990s, and used this knowledge to guide his successful 1998 election campaign. Until Chávez's victory, Venezuela had for several decades enjoyed stable, competitive electoral democracy within procedural and political limits prescribed by the Puntofijo power-sharing pact, signed by three major parties in 1959.⁹ The Puntofijo arrangements—not to mention years of petroleum-based prosperity, economic growth, and political clientelism—had made Venezuela into an apparent success story, vividly illustrated to

visiting foreigners by the Venezuelan elite's predilection for highly conspicuous consumption.

From 1958 through 1980, Venezuela registered average rates of economic growth of more than five percent a year, with petroleum revenues remaining high. These favorable economic conditions, however, began to give way in the late 1970s, before declining even more sharply during the long global economic recession of the late 1980s. Declining economic growth and living standards produced rising national debt, leading to the implementation of painful austerity policies advocated by the International Monetary Fund and other international financial institutions, as well as by Venezuelan economists. Rising unemployment and poverty led to increasing popular resentment, which ultimately exploded into the streets during a violent uprising in 1989, known as the *caracazo*.

This popular rancor was effectively channeled by Lieutenant Colonel Chávez, a retired military officer who had gained some notoriety for his unsuccessful attempt—apparently inspired by the revolutionary military government that came to power in Peru in 1968—to carry out a coup in 1992. The economic duress of the 1980s, and the growing public perception that the economic plight of most Venezuelans was being largely ignored by a complacent and entrenched *partidocracia*, led to a steady drop in the rates of voter participation in national elections. The two established parties that had alternated stints in power since 1959—Acción Democrática and COPEI—each received only slightly more than 20 percent of the vote in 1993, when former president Rafael Caldera, running on a third-party ticket, won election with just a 30 percent vote share. These conditions opened the way for Chávez's populist electoral campaign in 1998, when he positioned himself in opposition to established parties and politicians, corruption, inequality, and international “neoliberal” intervention. He won a landslide victory with 56.2 percent of the vote.

Venezuela's economic and political establishment was stunned by Chávez's election and his early policies. Some conspired with military officers in a failed coup in 2002. Others supported a general strike spearheaded by the petroleum sector; some engaged in economic sabotage. Many qualified petroleum experts emigrated, while many prosperous Venezuelans moved much of their capital abroad. Elites belittled Chávez's political talent and popular support, considering him unfit to be president. They also marshalled international backing, especially in the United States, in opposition to Chávez and his government. (Some in the U.S. government may have quietly encouraged the attempted 2002 coup, and some certainly welcomed it publicly during its first hours, when it seemed likely to succeed.)¹⁰

With a combination of political instinct, willpower, and good fortune, Chávez managed not only to survive the coup attempt, but to emerge from it even stronger than before. He defeated the

general strike, deftly overcame labor disputes in the petroleum sector and countered other attempts to weaken his government. He strengthened his power by adopting a perpetual-campaign mindset, frequently travelling across the country, projecting himself into homes through his frequent appearances on radio and television, and by establishing—with Cuban assistance—major programs to address the urgent needs of the poor and lower middle classes.

Chávez fell mortally ill with cancer in 2011, and despite traveling to Cuba for several rounds of treatment in 2012, died in March 2013. To the end, Chávez retained strong popular support, due in no small part to his ability to convert U.S. opposition into a domestic and international political asset. Chávez took advantage of Venezuela's vast petroleum resources and the global boom in oil prices (from 2003 to 2012) to spread the fruits of the commodities bonanza around the country, funding lavish social welfare programs that reduced poverty and dramatically increased living standards for poor, working, and middle-class Venezuelans. Over this period, however, Chávez also increasingly manipulated electoral procedures, undermined checks and balances between branches of government, challenged judicial independence, stepped up interference with the independent press and media, intimidated dissenters, frequently relied on loyal military officers to fill high-level cabinet posts, and reshaped and politicized the armed forces. With these steps, he transformed Venezuela's once stable, pacted democracy first into a hybrid regime, and then into an increasingly autocratic state, developing a formula for the rapid consolidation of state power that would later be replicated elsewhere in the region.¹¹

Upon his death, Chávez was succeeded by his handpicked successor, Minister of Foreign Affairs Nicolás Maduro, who used the popular support he had inherited from the fallen *comandante* to win the presidential election held in April 2013 (albeit by a fairly close margin). In subsequent years, however, Maduro's support collapsed as a result of drastic economic decline, skyrocketing inflation, deteriorating public services, rampant violence, worsening corruption, expanded and intensified political repression, and his personal lack of the populist charisma on which Chávez had relied. Although he has had diminishing levels of public support since 2013, Maduro's management of promotions and assignments in the armed forces, and his purging of dissenting officers, has helped him to retain power.

Public opinion polls show that in recent years Maduro's overall approval rating has rarely exceeded 15 percent. (By comparison, public approval for Guaidó was greater than 50 percent immediately after his designation as interim president in January 2019, and reached 77 percent briefly some weeks later, but his popularity declined as his efforts to unseat Maduro made little headway.) Guaidó's attempt to fracture the armed forces by attempting to deliver humanitarian aid over the Colombian border in February 2019 failed badly, as did his effort to recruit senior government officials to depose Maduro on April 30, 2019, despite both plots enjoying *de facto*

U.S. support.¹² Support for Guaidó plunged even further in the wake of Operation Gideon, a bungled effort to overthrow Maduro in May 2020; the operation, spearheaded by Venezuelan opposition maximalists in cooperation with foreign mercenaries, U.S. Special Forces veterans, and some former Venezuelan military personnel, was penetrated by Venezuelan intelligence and failed embarrassingly. The constitutional term of the National Assembly that had designated Guaidó as interim president ended in January 2021, removing the legal basis of his claimed legitimacy. Today, Maduro and Guaidó are about equally unpopular among the Venezuelan public, with approval ratings hovering between 10 and 20 percent each; their approval ratings were 15 percent and 17 percent respectively in May 2021.¹³

Durability of the Chavistas

Venezuelan opponents of *chavismo* generally attribute its durability to Maduro's ruthlessness and manipulation, and to what they characterize as unprecedented repression and corruption that, in their opinion, continue to ensure the loyalty of both the military leadership and key civilian officials. Many also argue that international actors, particularly the U.S. government, have failed to challenge the Venezuelan government sufficiently, while some maintain that Maduro's endurance is due to Cuba's alleged control over *chavismo*.

The *chavistas*, especially under Maduro, have repeatedly harassed and repressed members of the opposition—sometimes employing extended incarceration, torture, and extrajudicial killings by security forces—but significant opposition activity, including generally open dissent and street demonstrations, has nevertheless persisted.¹⁴ The *chavistas* have undoubtedly rigged some elections, but the opposition has boycotted some in protest (and in part to mask their own lack of support), and the *chavistas* have conceded two electoral losses at the national level. In 2021, in response to discussions with opposition figure Henrique Capriles (who nearly defeated Maduro

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in the 2013 election and is now a main rival of Guaidó for leadership of the opposition movement) and European diplomats, two leading opposition figures were named among the five rectors of the National Electoral Council (CNE), the body responsible for the administration of Venezuela's elections. These appointments may indicate that Maduro is feeling pressure—not only from the opposition and the international community but also from sectors of the armed forces—to improve Venezuela's international reputation with

respect to human rights and electoral integrity.

Some senior Venezuelan officials and military entities have certainly been involved in the international narcotics trade and other illicit trafficking operations. But Venezuela still remains much less important to the global narcotics trade than Mexico or Colombia (although the participation of *chavista* officials in the drug trade adds a significant complicating factor to any eventual negotiations). Cuba's role in supporting healthcare and other social service initiatives, under both Chávez and Maduro, and its provisioning of military intelligence and counterintelligence services have been important to successive *chavista* governments, but Cuba does not control Venezuela; indeed, Cuba itself depends on Venezuela for energy and security.¹⁵

Hugo Chávez was charismatic, manipulative, and astute, but perhaps his greatest asset—more the result of luck and good timing than of effective policy—was the fact that he rose to and consolidated power during a sustained period of high global petroleum prices. This windfall income funded generous social policies that—at least, for a time—markedly improved the welfare of Venezuela's poor, elevated the living standards of its middle class, and bolstered the *chavistas'* early popularity and power. Millions of Venezuelans felt more empowered, engaged, and motivated to participate in politics than at any previous point in the country's history. Even though their economic circumstances have since worsened dramatically, many Venezuelans still associate *chavismo* with an era of largesse and prosperity. Venezuelan polls show that Hugo Chávez enjoys approval ratings above 50 percent nearly a decade after his death.

A separate important source of *chavismo's* endurance has been Venezuela's efforts—beginning under Chávez and expanded under Maduro—to solicit international political, diplomatic, economic, and logistical support, not only from Cuba but also from China, Russia, Turkey, Iran, and India, as well as several Caribbean, Central American and South American nations (including, at different points, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico). Each international ally has supported Caracas in different ways and for its own reasons—in many cases, as an indirect rejection of U.S. policy toward the region. Several have undermined international economic sanctions, thus hampering the ability of the United States to exert “maximum pressure” on Venezuela's government. Opposition and international-led strategies for achieving a democratic transition need to take more fully into account the Maduro government's diverse international supporters, their respective interests and motives, and their varied modes of support.¹⁶ The US campaign of “maximum pressure” has had the unintended effect of strengthening international support for Maduro, but a different approach might convert some of Maduro's international backers into advocates of a negotiated transition.



Photo credit: Juan Guaidó speaks during a rally in Caracas, Venezuela: Ruben Alfonso, Shutterstock, January 2019

The Strategic Errors of the Venezuelan Opposition and its US Supporters

Leading figures of the opposition have underestimated the *chavistas*, their deeply rooted support among Venezuela's disadvantaged populations, and their determination, ingenuity, and tenacity, including Maduro's own distinct leadership skills. They have also underestimated the importance of developing and consistently articulating a compelling, positive vision for Venezuela's future, beyond mere denunciation of the Maduro government. The opposition has likewise exaggerated the efficacy of delegitimizing the Maduro government through rhetoric and boycott, and of self-legitimizing through repeated proclamations and solicitations of foreign support. The Venezuelan opposition has failed to demonstrate in practice a prioritized commitment to solving the problems of Venezuelan citizens by working on practical issues, from power outages to deteriorating infrastructure, from education to public health, from drought to humanitarian relief. Recent cooperative initiatives undertaken between sectors of the government and elements of the opposition to work with international nongovernmental organizations both on responding to COVID-19 and on preventing hunger are welcome exceptions to this tendency.

Another flaw in the opposition's strategy has been its high degree of dependence on international support, and especially its deference to elements in and around the U.S. government (particularly during the Trump administration).¹⁷ Until recently, some maximalist opposition leaders maintained as an article of faith the delusion that the U.S. would eventually deploy military force

to either remove or drastically weaken the *chavistas*, an excessive optimism reinforced by irresponsible remarks made by some U.S. officials, including President Trump, that “all options [were] on the table.” Hopes for an imminent landing of U.S. Marines discouraged the opposition from developing independent strategies while they waited for the United States to act.¹⁸

Not only did the U.S. government encourage misplaced optimism within the Venezuelan opposition (especially within the diaspora); it also encouraged the opposition’s counterproductive decision to boycott the 2018 elections, and in effect sabotaged the 2019 Norway-led explorations of a possible negotiated agreement between the opposition and the Maduro regime by imposing additional U.S. sanctions just as negotiators on both sides were preparing to discuss a joint request to lift certain existing sanctions. Over time, the opposition’s vocal advocacy of U.S. economic sanctions has become a political liability, as most Venezuelans have suffered enormous deprivation while the sanctions have failed to make discernible progress in either ending or easing *chavista* rule.

Toward a New Path Forward for Venezuela

The Maduro government, the democratic opposition, and the Venezuelan people more generally have all thus far failed to achieve their aims. Maduro has retained power but has been unable to achieve economic prosperity, social stability, and sustained popular support, thus raising questions about the long-term viability of *chavismo* and its commitment to equity and inclusion. Although the Maduro government lacks much public support, however, so do the opposition political parties that have remained divided and largely ineffective. Those in the international community who hope that Venezuela will recover from its humanitarian catastrophe, respect international law, and emerge as a peaceful, stable, productive, and prosperous nation have also been stymied. Most important, the past several years have been increasingly difficult for most Venezuelans, with poverty and hunger provoking mass emigration to Colombia, Peru, other Latin American countries, Spain, and the United States.

Opposition representatives, government officials (including national security officers), and other civil society leaders (including those hailing from the private sector and religious institutions), should work together to develop a credible process for the implementation of transitional justice, a key imperative for democratic transition.

There is no credible security threat to the United States or any other major power that might make likely an external military intervention to set Venezuela on a different path. The days when the U.S. government’s disapproval of internal affairs in a Latin American country was

sufficient to produce decisive covert or military intervention are firmly in the past, due to changes in global geopolitics, geoeconomics, and international norms, as well as to the evolving attitudes of the U.S. public.

Effective progress toward ending authoritarian rule and restoring the rule of law and democratic governance in Venezuela consequently depends much more on the internal dynamics of Venezuela itself—in the armed forces, civil society and the private sector, the opposition, and the ruling coalition—than it does on the will and priorities of the United States or any other country in the Americas. Those who seek political change in Venezuela must accept and internalize this reality, and use it to undergird a new approach based on five fundamental principles:

First, an effective strategy for political change will best begin by fostering broad support for a vision of Venezuela’s future that reflects the country’s history, values, norms, and popular expectations, while also adhering to international law, including the protection of fundamental human rights. Such an articulated vision should be based on broad consultation and deliberation with and among representatives of civil society, diverse political organizations, business and trade union leaders, and widely respected educational and religious figures. Processes to

The political opposition should vigorously contest local, state, and national elections, including those scheduled for November 2021.

facilitate such deliberation need to be strengthened and sustained; this process must also endeavor to attract many Venezuelans who once supported Chávez before becoming disaffected, as well as those who previously supported Guaidó before becoming discouraged.

Second, opponents of Maduro’s autocracy should find concrete ways to translate their vision for Venezuela’s future into actionable programs to help cope with the country’s massive practical problems: protecting public health, recovering from the pandemic and its repercussions, upgrading the educational system, curbing violence, expanding employment opportunities, and improving housing, transportation, and infrastructure. There are obvious limits to what an opposition can do from outside government. If it can be negotiated, an interim government of national recovery—perhaps modeled after the historic power-sharing Transitional Executive Council that presided over the abolition of apartheid in South Africa and combined representatives of both the authoritarian regime and the democratic opposition—could serve as a constructive way to tackle urgent issues. In any case, the opposition should strive to cooperate actively with the national, regional, and local governments in Venezuela, setting aside political differences and grievance rather than insisting that the Maduro government’s “illegitimacy” forbids any such cooperative efforts.



Third, the opposition should vigorously contest local, state, and national elections, including those scheduled for November 2021. Elections are the best way to achieve political legitimacy in Venezuela, where democratic values remain popular and influential.¹⁹ The opposition should continue—with the support of international governments and multilateral organizations—to press for reforms in electoral rules and procedures and to ensure international monitoring of elections, all with the aim of guaranteeing their fairness and integrity. Even if the elections do not meet the opposition’s and/or the international community’s high standards for what is free and fair, and even if the opposition is not victorious in any given election, active participation will nonetheless aid the opposition in crafting and communicating its political message, building greater popular support, developing new leadership, enhancing its legitimacy nationally and internationally, and strengthening their influence in Venezuelan society. Deliberate or accidental events that threaten to derail negotiations or scheduled elections are common in transition situations, but should not force transition makers out of the contest. In politics, as in sports, it is hard to gain ground from the sidelines.

Fourth, opposition representatives, government officials (including national security officers), and other civil society leaders (including those hailing from the private sector and religious institutions), should work together to develop a credible process for the implementation of transitional justice, a key imperative for democratic transition. Confidential discussions on this crucial issue should not be delayed.

Fifth, if and when a unified and strategic Venezuelan opposition emerges and begins to develop and skillfully implement a medium- to long-term strategy for the transition to democracy, it should chart its own course, rejecting the undue influence or oversight of any foreign power or multilateral organization. International actors played important roles in facilitating previous democratic transitions and will almost certainly assume a vital supportive role in the Venezuelan case, but they cannot unilaterally impose a solution, and should not try.

These five steps—developing and communicating an attractive vision for Venezuela’s future; cooperating with incumbent Venezuelan officials on practical measures to improve the quality of life of the Venezuelan citizenry; prioritizing the contestation of free and fair elections; developing processes to achieve transitional justice; and enlisting international support—could help the opposition improve its position and expand its popular base. This, in turn, could bolster the opposition’s negotiating stance, reinforce its demands for clean elections, and help remove obstacles to a democratic transition. Establishing effective democratic governance in Venezuela may well take considerable time, but these steps would orient the process in a more promising direction.

A united and strategic Venezuelan opposition, drawing on diverse elements of civil society as well as political parties, might very well gain important support from interested stakeholders in the international community, including China, Cuba, Russia, Turkey, the European Union, the Vatican, other Latin American nations, Canada, and the United States, as well as engage the assistance of such international mediators as Norway, Sweden, and/or perhaps the United Nations.²⁰ Such consultations, specific negotiations, and targeted assistance programs should focus on improving the prospects for a peaceful transition: reversing Venezuela’s economic and political deterioration by accelerating its economic and social recovery; developing and implementing transitional justice procedures; rebuilding political institutions, including the independent judiciary; and respecting the core interests of all parties under the rule of law.

All stakeholders in the international community can and should rally behind these goals, which serve the respective interests of each. In this context, the United States should quietly explore with Cuba whether positive changes in the U.S.-Cuba bilateral relationship can be negotiated on the basis of mutual respect for sovereignty, fundamental human rights, cooperative problem-solving and the settlement of outstanding disputes. Such a course could alter the roles of both countries in Venezuela in ways that would greatly benefit the Venezuelan people. It might also encourage a broad, medium-term multinational effort to improve social, economic, and political conditions throughout the Caribbean Basin. Viewed through the prism of U.S. electoral politics, this scenario may seem remote. But changing domestic circumstances and policies could lead Cuba to want to reinvent itself—with appropriate international encouragement—as an active, positive partner in the Basin’s future. A democratic transition in Venezuela, supported by both Cuba and the United States in tandem, could bring an end to many decades of stagnation and stalemate, not only in Venezuela and in US-Cuba relations, but in how the United States relates with all its closest neighbors in the Americas. The US government and civil society organizations should marshal new approaches and energies to explore these new possibilities rather than continuing to leave US-Cuba relations to be defined in southern Florida and by domestic political considerations.

Final Reflections

Patricio Aylwin, president of the “No” coalition that won the 1988 plebiscite that ended Augusto Pinochet’s dictatorship, and then the constitutional president of Chile from 1988 to 1995, recounted in his memoir of Chile’s 15-year struggle for re-democratization:

“Many of us who wound up heading the struggle for the ‘No’ pursued other solutions, which generally called for the immediate retirement of Pinochet, the formation of a provisional government, the convening of a constituent assembly,

and the plebiscitary approval of a new constitution. The 1988 plebiscite was truly our final trench, after having lost prior battles. I believe all of us would have preferred to triumph earlier and in a different way. Perhaps these defeats were necessary to forge the solidity of the *Concertación* and to endow us with the realism that one needs so much to govern.”²¹

These wise comments from a modern master of coalition-forming, consensus-building, strategic patience, and pragmatic compromise underscore attitudes that have helped Chile and other countries achieve their successful transitions from authoritarianism to effective democratic governance. Aylwin’s insights can help all parties understand that a peaceful path from autocracy to inclusive democracy in Venezuela, however winding, may be within reach.

About the Author

Abraham F. Lowenthal, professor emeritus at the University of Southern California, is a widely published scholar on Latin American politics, democratic governance and transitions, U.S. foreign policy, and California's global role. He is the author of numerous books and articles, including eight essays in *Foreign Affairs*. A serial institution-builder, he is the founding director of the Wilson Center's Latin American Program, the Inter-American Dialogue, and the Pacific Council on International Policy, as well as an influential policy analyst and advisor.

Notes

¹ According to the April 2021 Encuesta Nacional Omnibus of public opinion indicators published by Datanálisis, a leading Venezuelan polling firm, 92.4 percent of Venezuelans had a negative evaluation of Maduro (47 percent “very bad”), with 7.19 of respondents indicating a positive opinion of Maduro (of which six percent indicated having a “very good” opinion of the Venezuelan president). These data, and most other public opinion data referred to in this essay, come from this report.

² I was deeply involved in the Wilson Center’s project on transitions from authoritarian rule, undertaken in 1979 when all but two South American nations (Colombia and Venezuela) were under autocratic rule. The project aimed to analyze how these coercive regimes might be democratized, emphasizing their political composition and concerns and developing strategies to strengthen respective national oppositions. This project resulted in *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Prospects for Democracy in Latin America and Southern Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), a landmark volume edited by Guillermo O’Donnell, Philippe Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead that would become a handbook for pro-democracy analysts and activists in many nations. More recently, with Sergio Bitar, a political leader and public intellectual in Chile, I co-edited *Democratic Transitions: Conversations with World Leaders* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), a study of nine successful democratic transitions on four continents, featuring face to face interviews with thirteen presidents and prime ministers who played important roles in such transitions in South Africa, Ghana, Indonesia, the Philippines, Poland, Spain, Chile, Brazil, and Mexico. Both projects were, as I put it in the Foreword to the *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule* volume, exercises in “thoughtful wishing,” guided by a normative orientation toward democratic governance, but rigorous and deliberate in method. That same concept animates this essay, as well.

³ See Cristián Correa, “Preguntas esenciales para una política de justicia transicional en Venezuela,” International Center for Transitional Justice, for a useful discussion of these issues.

⁴ For useful data on the political attitudes of Venezuela’s diaspora, see “The Exile Effect: Venezuela’s Overseas Opposition and Social Media,” *Report #86*, International Crisis Group (February 24, 2021).

⁵ See Michael Camilleri and Riva Kantowitz, “When ‘Dialogue’ Becomes a Dirty Word: The Case of Venezuela,” *Development Dialogue* 64 (2019), 52-63.

⁶ There is a growing literature on the issues posed by “transitional justice,” the attempt to reconcile human rights concepts and accountability with political feasibility and issues of reconciliation and coexistence in bitterly divided post-conflict societies. See, for example, Colleen Murphy, *The Conceptual Foundations of Transitional Justice* (Cambridge University Press, 2017) and Michael Newman, *Transitional Justice: Contending with the Past* (Polity, 2019).

⁷ Numerous examples of the methods mentioned in this and the following paragraph are documented in *Democratic Transitions: Conversations with World Leaders*.

⁸ For this section, I have drawn extensively on reports and discussions produced and facilitated by the Center for Political Studies at the Catholic University Andrés Bello (UCAB) in Caracas, the International Crisis Group, the Inter-American Dialogue, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Atlantic Council, the U.S. Institute for Peace, the Carter Center, the Washington Office on Latin America, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies, as well as by the Venezuela Working Group of the Wilson Center's Latin American Program. I also draw upon many columns and interviews published in *Tal Cual*, *Pro DaVinci*, *El Universal*, *El Impulso* and *El Nacional* in Caracas, and upon the writings of and my discussions with the following leading analysts of Venezuelan affairs: Mibelis Acevedo, Benigno Alarcón, Paul Angelo, Cynthia Arnson, Sergio Bitar, Michael Camilleri, Javier Corrales, Richard Downie, Philip Gunson, Miriam Kornblith, Luis Vicente León, Margarita López Maya, Jennifer McCoy, Francisco Monaldi, Frank Mora, Moisés Naím, Deborah Norden, Michael Penfold, John Polga-Hecimovich, Geoff Ramsey, Francisco Rodríguez, Steven Salisbury, Michael Shifter, David Smilde, Harold Trinkunas, Laurence Whitehead, as well as the late Simón Alberto Consalvi, Pedro Nikken and Teodoro Petkoff. I have also engaged in confidential discussions regarding Venezuela with Thomas Shannon and Elliott Abrams, senior officials in charge of the U.S. government's Venezuela policy at different points, and with other former and current officials of the United States, Canada, and several Latin American and European nations. None of these persons is responsible for any of the statements or arguments contained within this essay, with which some of them no doubt disagree. I continue to study these issues and welcome critical reaction to this work in progress.

⁹ The Punto Fijo accord of 1959 among COPEI, Acción Democrática and the Unión Republicana Demócrata (URD), three social democratic parties representing the majority of Venezuelan voters, was negotiated to assure that democratic politics would prevail after the long Pérez Jiménez dictatorship ended. The pact helped Venezuela maintain democratic competition within agreed limits and provided stability for more than twenty years, while in effect freezing out parties to the left and to the right. See Steve Ellner and Daniel Hellinger, *Venezuelan Politics in the Chávez Era: Class Polarization and Conflict* (Lynne Rienner, 2004).

¹⁰ No official US acknowledgement of a role in the aborted coup attempt against Hugo Chávez in 2002 has been offered, but press reports at the time and statements by senior US officials then, including Assistant Secretary of State Otto Reich, NSC Senior Director for Latin America Roger Noriega, and White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer, made clear US sympathy for the attempted coup and quick acceptance of the new government. See, for example, "US Gave the Nod to Venezuelan Coup," *The Guardian*, April 17, 2002.

¹¹ For an insightful analysis of the stages of evolution from electoral democracy to autocracy, see Javier Corrales and Michael Penfold, *Dragon in the Tropics: Hugo Chávez and the Political Economy of Revolution in Venezuela*, 2nd edition (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press 2015).

¹² Well-sourced and detailed coverage of the April 2019 and May 2020 incidents are available on Wikipedia. Data regarding support for Maduro and Guaidó is from Datanálisis 2021.

¹³ See Datanálisis, May 2021.

¹⁴ The best source on Venezuelan human rights violations, including thousands of extrajudicial killings by security forces, is the extensive report produced by Michelle Bachelet, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and former president of Chile. See ohchr.org.

¹⁵ For an insightful and informative note on Cuba-Venezuela-US relations, see Richard E. Feinberg, "The Geopolitics of Cuba-Venezuela-US Relations: An Informal Note," in Cynthia Arnson, ed., *Venezuela's Authoritarian Allies: The Ties that Bind?* (Washington, DC: Latin American Program, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, June 2021), 122-35.

¹⁶ See Cynthia Arnson, ed., *Venezuela's Authoritarian Allies*. See also the illuminating article by Javier Corrales, "Authoritarian Survival: Why Maduro Hasn't Fallen," *Journal of Democracy*, 30:3 (July, 2020), 39-53.

¹⁷ This and the following paragraph are based on personal interviews and on John Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened: A White House Memoir* (lulu.com, 2020) and Olivia Beavers, “Bolton Alleges Trump Said ‘It’d be ‘cool’ to Invade Venezuela,” *The Hill*, June 17, 2020.

¹⁸ U.S. policy, especially during the Trump administration, contributed unintentionally but significantly to reinforcing the *chavistas*’ hold on Venezuela. President Trump appears to have realized, perhaps at an early stage, that U.S. military intervention in Venezuela—however alluring it might have appeared—would be highly problematic and costly. Evidence mounted that an invasion to overthrow the Maduro government would likely lead to U.S. involvement in another protracted, “useless” war that would be deeply unpopular with the U.S. public (including much of Trump’s core political base). Nearly all U.S. military, intelligence, and diplomatic advisers recommended against military action. The apparent decision not to use force was never clearly and explicitly communicated, however, despite its significance—probably because Trump and some of his advisers wanted Cuban-American and Venezuelan-American voters, especially in the crucial swing state of Florida, to be impressed by the ample public and symbolic support the Trump administration was providing to anti-*chavista* leaders.

¹⁹ Polls by Datanálisis and Latinobarómetro confirm strong continuing support for democracy in Venezuela as well as high confirmation of intention to vote in free and fair elections.

²⁰ The Organization of American States (OAS) is not likely to be effective in a mediating role because Secretary General Luis Almagro has been considered so partisan, and because the United States is so dominant in the organization.

²¹ Patricio Aylwin, *El Reencuentro de los Demócratas* (Santiago, Chile: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2018), 20 (translation from the Spanish my own).

