

# Democracy, Solidarity, and the Left: Reflecting on the Last Venezuelan Elections

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The recent Venezuelan presidential elections leave little room for doubt: the winner was not the candidate who secured the most votes, but the one who wields enough repressive power to claim victory. The government of Nicolás Maduro has abandoned the original project of Chavismo, which aimed to build hegemonic power by winning elections (Poulantzas 1981). While this approach can be and has been criticized in the past, it was based on a tradition within the left that criticizes bourgeois democracy yet seeks to transform the state through electoral victories. This is no longer the case.

Venezuela's ruling class, though still concerned with maintaining its leftist image abroad, has sidelined traditional left-wing political parties and union structures, purged its administration of dissidents, and alienated the working-class base that once formed the backbone of the Chavista movement. Following the announcement of the election results by the National Electoral Council (CNE), working-class people and their neighborhoods became primary targets of political repression.

The tension between radical leftist ideas and democracy has dissolved in Venezuela. The Maduro government neither upholds leftist policies nor democratic principles. Thus Venezuela serves as a stark example of unrestrained power and the ways in which an authoritarian model maintains and reproduces itself (Bracho et Andréani 2023).

This raises important questions: how do dissident left-wing groups survive in this context? What is the role of the international left? And how can political efforts be reoriented, given the need to navigate an increasingly authoritarian regime?

## 1. The Venezuelan Left and the Presidential Elections: Fragmentation and Despair

The relationship between Chavista governments and the broader Venezuelan left has always been fraught. From Hugo Chávez's first presidency in 1999, historical left-wing organizations like *Bandera Roja* rejected the rise of a former military officer to power. Despite this, many leftist political organizations—parties, unions, and community leaders—rallied behind Chávez and helped build his government. This led to scholarly debates on the tension between cooptation and autonomy, as various branches of the Venezuelan left became entangled in the Chavista project (Smilde et Hellinger 2011, López Maya 2011, García Guadilla 2008, Schiller 2018).

Over the years, scholars documented the democratic backsliding experienced by unions, *comuneros* (communal council members), participants in participatory policies, and inside activists (Torrealba M. 2023, Posado 2021, Bracho 2019). These works highlighted how political hegemony was built not only by subduing the traditional opposition (Jiménez 2023); but also by dividing and controlling those who were supposed to form the foundation of the socialist project.

In the days leading up to the last presidential election, the effects of this division within the dissident left were especially pronounced. Calls for unity against the Maduro government and for popular democracy coexisted with different electoral strategies. Some organizations explicitly called for voting against Maduro, others advocated abstention due to the lack of popular representation among the candidates, while some refrained from giving specific instructions but urged the defense of the people's will as expressed in the tally results.

Unity among these leftist factions is difficult to achieve today, given their varied relationships with Chavismo as both an identity and a political movement. While some organizations proudly maintain their historical distance from Chavismo, others claim the Chavista identity as the standpoint from which they reject the Maduro government. However, the rejection of electoral manipulation and the political repression following mass mobilizations has fostered a certain understanding, allowing leftist dissidents to engage in dialogue and sometimes unite in mutual support.

Another unifying factor is the recognition of their weakness without international solidarity—from grassroots exchanges with organizations in other countries and through pressure from left-wing governments in Latin America aimed at persuading the Maduro regime to change course. Unfortunately, these expectations have largely gone unmet.

## **2. Latin American Lefts and Solidarity: A Two-Level Perspective**

In the weeks following the election, the role of Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico's foreign ministries in mediating with the Venezuelan government was highly anticipated. Left-wing leaders such as Lula, Petro, and López Obrador were seen as potential mediators who could use their legitimacy to persuade Maduro to reenter negotiations with the traditional opposition.

Their refusal to recognize the CNE's announced electoral results was expected to signal the untenable position of the Maduro regime.

At the organizational level, the familiar "tankie" positions of uncritical solidarity with the Venezuelan government reemerged (Monedero 2024; Rivera 2024; Déronne 2024). However, these positions faced significant challenges. Activists and scholars from, or closely working with, Venezuela condemned the electoral fraud and the repression faced by the Venezuelan people (Hanson et Zubillaga 2024; Velasco 2024; Falcone 2024; Bracho 2024). This time, the critiques came from voices that could not easily be dismissed as imperialist or aligned with U.S. interests. The Venezuelan left itself has been at the forefront of this debate, using its legitimacy to share the realities on the ground with the international left (*Aporrea* 2024; « Nota del Comité Nacional de Conflicto de los Trabajadores en Lucha » 2023; *Efecto Cocuyo* 2024). Indeed, expectations from below—particularly from weakened left-wing organizations in Venezuela—have been significant, with hopes for solidarity from counterparts in Latin America and beyond. As in many other democratic struggles, international and transnational strategies are central to building power and ensuring the survival of local and national movements (Allain 2016).

The top-down and grassroots approaches to solidarity operate on different timelines and with different rationales. Today, mediation efforts by left-wing governments have stalled. López Obrador has distanced himself from the Brazilian and Colombian initiatives. Lula da Silva has declared that Brazil will not recognize either presidential candidate until the CNE provides detailed, bureau-by-bureau election results. Yet, these statements lack a clear strategy for pressuring the Venezuelan government to comply.

Meanwhile, internationalist solidarity among left-wing organizations continues. Public declarations of support from various political organizations, unions, and activists have emerged across Latin

America and beyond.<sup>1</sup> The hope is that these expressions of solidarity will evolve into more organic, sustained support, especially given the deepening authoritarianism in Venezuela.

### 3. Analyzing Authoritarianism as a Governing Model: Reevaluating Negotiation and Building Dissidence.

The aftermath of the Venezuelan elections is dire: thousands have been imprisoned, more than 20 people have been killed, and activists and journalists have had their passports revoked. Most recently, Edmundo González Urrutia, the traditional opposition's presidential candidate and likely winner, fled to Spain to seek refuge. Alongside these events, another dynamic has become evident: the Maduro government's ability to maintain control and build a new *pax autoritaria*, possibly drawing from the earlier *pax bodegónica* discussed in recent years.

This process is not new. The increasingly authoritarian rule of Maduro has been documented and analyzed extensively: the concentration of power, economic alliances with the military, the fragmentation of sovereignty, and the privatization of state resources are well-known characteristics of his government. However, new or more pronounced features seem to be emerging.

First, there is an increase in political repression, particularly targeting the working class, with little regard for how this is perceived by the general population or the international community. Maduro's public announcement about rehabilitating the Tocarón and Tucuyito prisons to detain "terrorists" evokes memories of Venezuela's last military dictatorship and its use of forced labor to control political prisoners. This rhetoric is difficult for Maduro's international apologists to justify.

Second, there is a growing capacity to secure *de facto* support from different sectors of the population, either through convenience or fear of alternative options. In my recent observations, I've encountered the wealthy segment of society that benefits from Maduro's extremely liberal economic policies—tax breaks for investors, severe reductions in workers' rights, and relaxed territorial sovereignty to allow for extractive activities in protected regions. Their practical support for Maduro—by voting for him—is clearly motivated by class interests and not by democratic ideals.

Conversely, I also encountered working-class individuals who saw the Maduro government as a source of precarious, yet tangible, stability. Their fear of an opposition government, which they believe would "come to get what's owed,"<sup>2</sup> has led them to support Maduro, not out of political conviction, but out of fear of losing what little personal security or standing they have under his rule.

In both cases, democracy as a system of governance or a set of values plays a minimal role in determining political and voting decisions. It appears that Maduro's authoritarian regime has managed to create a cross-class solidarity not based on shared values or aspirations for the future, but on the acceptance of the status quo by a significant minority—comprising parts of the old economic elites, the new *boli-bourgeoisie*, and the remaining grassroots loyalists. In this context, controlled electoral fraud becomes acceptable, seen as a strategic tool to preserve the status quo not as part of a vision for the future, but as a present reality that certain sectors have learned to navigate and even profit from.

Given these dynamics, it's crucial to rethink negotiation strategies with the Maduro government. Negotiations must recognize the stability of the authoritarian regime and the external support it commands. Thus, expectations should not be based on hopes for internal

<sup>1</sup> As is the case of the "Pacto ecosocial e intercultural del Sur" [\[online\]](#) or the united pronouncement from the French leftwing parties in "solidarity with the Venezuelan's people democratic demands" [\[online\]](#).

<sup>2</sup> *Venir a cobrar.*

ruptures in power, but on the understanding that *révolution de palais* is neither likely nor desirable. Instead, democracy advocates must ask: what can be guaranteed so that the meaningful minority might find it in their interest to pursue a democratic path?

Claiming to have definitive answers to these questions would be presumptuous. However, potential options and partial answers are part of Venezuela's current reality. Building dissidence is an everyday exercise carried out by the Venezuelan people. By dissidence, I mean both overt political actions and the everyday acts of solidarity that have helped people endure these past few weeks. While publicly naming these initiatives might endanger those involved, it's clear that activists are organizing, journalists are reporting, politicians are building legal cases against the electoral fraud, and international solidarity is being strengthened.

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Our understanding of authoritarian regimes tells us there is no inevitable path to democracy. Furthermore, as social scientists, we must separate our desires from our observations. In Venezuela, we are called both to understand the situation as it is and to strategize ways to change it. The recent Venezuelan elections have prompted clarifications at the international level about the tension between democracy and authoritarianism. It is our responsibility to contribute to these political and scientific efforts.

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