

REVIEW

Javier Corrales, *Autocracy Rising: How Venezuela Transitioned to Authoritarianism*

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For most of the second half of the twentieth century, Venezuela was probably the most promising democracy in Latin America. Today, it is one of the most authoritarian regimes in the region. What happened? In his book – *Autocracy Rising: How Venezuela Transitioned to Authoritarianism* – Javier Corrales answers that question. Leveraging an impressive amount of evidence, he provides a detailed account of Venezuela’s autocratisation process, focusing on the effects of party system fragmentation and learnt authoritarian practices and policies.

Corrales splits Venezuela’s autocratisation process into two stages. The first stage analyses the transition from a democratic regime into an authoritarian regime under Hugo Chávez (1999–2013). Democratic backsliding, he argues, is more likely under conditions of ‘asymmetric party system fragmentation’ (APSF). In the dispute for political supremacy (the Hobbesian Moment, as Julio Carrión calls it), an electorally strong unified ruling party facing a fragmented uncompetitive opposition facilitates the erosion of democracy (*A Dynamic Theory of Populism in Power: The Andes in Comparative Perspective* (Oxford University Press, 2022)). Not only does it enable the government to enact legislation that thwarts democratic institutions but it hinders the opposition’s ability to oppose it.

In Chapter 2, Corrales illustrates this part of the argument. During his government, the author shows, Chávez transformed Venezuela into a competitive authoritarian regime using ‘autocratic legalism’ (i.e. the selective application of the law), ‘constitutional tinkering’ (i.e. constitution amendment or replacement) and ‘legislative dodging’ (i.e. sidestepping the legislature to enact policy). He was able to use these tools, thanks to his cohesive coalition in Congress – initially under the Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario 200 (Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement 200, MBR–200) umbrella, later under the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (United Socialist Party of Venezuela, PSUV). While the opposition – which arrived fragmented to the 1998 elections – focused on solving its collective-action problems, Corrales posits, Chávez was able to push forward anti-democratic legislation through Congress.

The second stage of autocratisation in the book is the transition from a competitive authoritarian regime to a fully authoritarian regime. Corrales uses most of the

book to address this question. Chapters 3 and 4 set the puzzle: the author explains (in impressive detail) the origins and consequences of Venezuela's economic collapse starting in 2014 (Chapter 3) and the opposition's unification and strengthening process from 2006 to 2015 (Chapter 4). These two elements combined, Corrales convincingly demonstrates, represented an existential threat for Nicolás Maduro. How was he able to survive it?

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 answer this question. According to Corrales, Maduro was able to survive in power thanks to his deployment of what the author calls an 'institutional reservoir': the set of authoritarian practices and policies inherited from Chavismo. Leveraging the institutional control gained during the first stage of autocratisation, Maduro used these autocratic tools to avoid a rebellion in the ruling party, circumvent an opposition-controlled National Assembly, win electoral contests (particularly after 2015), control the spread of information, contain street protests and avoid military defections.

Moreover, the Venezuelan handpicked successor innovated upon this institutional reservoir. In particular, he engaged in what Corrales calls 'function fusion': a practice by which the government grants existing institutions the ability to perform functions usually reserved for other institutions (p. 151). Following the example of Chávez – which transformed the oil company PDVSA into an organisation to conduct foreign policy – Maduro gave the military a role in legal and illegal economic activities; transformed organised civilian groups (*colectivos*) into repressive organisations adjacent to the official security apparatus; turned members of the judicial branch into government contractors; gave leaders in the ruling party security and economic tasks; created the 2017 Constitutional Assembly to be a broad (and fluid) governing body; converted party-dominated communal councils into the main conduits for social assistance distribution; and delegated territorial control to foreign armed groups (mostly from Colombia). These innovations allowed the dictator to expand and solidify his governing coalition and, with that, secure himself in power.

Corrales uses Chapter 6 to assess his argument in three other cases: full autocratisation (Daniel Ortega (2007–present) in Nicaragua); liberalisation (Rafael Correa (2007–17) and his designated heir Lenín Moreno (2017–21) in Ecuador); and 'coasting' (Álvaro Uribe (2002–10) and his handpicked successor Juan Manuel Santos (2010–18) in Colombia). All three cases (according to Corrales) became semi-authoritarian thanks to an asymmetrically fragmented party system. Yet, only Nicaragua autocratised further. Ortega faced a rising united opposition with institutional reservoirs at hand; on the contrary, Moreno and Santos faced divided oppositions without the kind of control over state institutions that would have allowed them to take an authoritarian turn.

There is a lot to praise in this book. It is an important contribution to the regime change literature in Latin America. Despite a wealth of works on transitions from and to autocracy, unlike what has happened in Asia or the Middle East – with few exceptions (Javier Corrales, 'The Gatekeeper State: Limited Economic Reforms and Regime Survival in Cuba, 1989–2002', *Latin American Research Review*, 39: 2 (2004), pp. 35–65; Maryhen Jiménez, 'Contesting Autocracy: Repression and Opposition Coordination in Venezuela', *Political Studies*, 71: 1 (2021), pp. 47–68) – Latin American scholars have not paid much attention to the drivers of authoritarian

stability in the region. This book is a welcome addition to this literature. The 'function fusion' process outlined is of particular interest to understand other cases of authoritarian survival inside and outside the hemisphere.

Autocracy Rising is also a gold mine for those of us interested in Venezuela. Using primary and secondary sources, Corrales carefully describes Maduro's use of institutional reservoirs and function fusion. The kind of detail displayed by the book is impressive for two reasons. First, the Maduro government has been characterised by its opacity. Information about its inner dealings is very hard to get. Second, the literature on authoritarian survival is dominated by game theory analysis that pays little attention to the specific details of the cases. While that literature has its value, it is refreshing to see a book that does the opposite.

Like any other book, Corrales' manuscript has some shortcomings. I wished, for example, that he had engaged a bit better with the literature on authoritarian stability, particularly the literature on the survival of competitive authoritarian regimes. Works like Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way's *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2010) or Valerie J. Bunce and Sharon L. Wolchik's *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), for example, provide theories that explicitly try to address the puzzle of when and where do competitive authoritarian regimes (CARs) democratise, remain the same, or turn into more deeply entrenched authoritarian regimes. It would have been nice to see the discussion of the book in dialogue with these and other works.

I also wish there had been a more careful discussion of the endogeneity inherent in the book's theory. Corrales argues that APSF gives authoritarian leaders an upper hand to plough through their reforms. However, is APSF not precisely the outcome of these reforms? Are autocrats not able to strengthen their party in part by skewing the playing field? Likewise, the author argues that institutional reservoirs are key to transition from a semi to a fully authoritarian regime, yet are these reservoirs not the outcome of what is already a more profound case of authoritarianism? Even if Moreno and Santos had wanted to deepen authoritarianism in their countries – which is not clear (Caitlin Andrews-Lee and Laura Gamboa, 'When Handpicked Successors of Charismatic Leaders Prosper: The Surprising Success of Juan Manuel Santos in Colombia', *Democratization*, 29: 6 (2022), pp. 1116–36) – the very fact that the erosion of democracy was not as advanced in these countries as it was in Venezuela when Maduro attained power would have made it significantly harder for these presidents to further undermine democracy. A more explicit discussion separating the independent and dependent variables would have been useful to better understand the book's argument.

Despite some of these questions, as one of the first book-length manuscripts on processes of authoritarian survival in Latin America, I think this is an important book to read for scholars interested in autocratisation and more specifically Venezuela.