

Book Review

Javier Corrales, *Autocracy Rising: How Venezuela Transitioned to Authoritarianism*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2022. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index, 256 pp.; hardback 85\$, paperback 32\$, ebook 30\$

I write this review while Venezuela enters 2024, in what is meant to be a critical election year for the country. President Maduro aims to go to the polls to seek reelection, once again, as he did in 2018. Will this election be minimally competitive, free, and fair? Are we facing a possible turn to democracy in Venezuela?

Maduro's 2018 reelection was widely perceived as lacking electoral integrity. It was boycotted by several opposition forces, and the contest and its results were denounced as unconstitutional and fraudulent by many at home and abroad. It came right after a time of increasing opposition contestation against the regime: opposition parties had handily won the National Assembly elections in 2015, and held massive and sustained protests in the coming months, threatening the government's stability in 2017. That time was a major juncture in Venezuelan politics.

Facing an economy in tatters and mounting opposition (including the National Assembly's declaration of Juan Guaidó as interim president in 2019), Maduro opted for further autocratizing the country—increasing repression against political opponents, shutting down or blatantly manipulating electoral mechanisms to challenge the regime, using the regime-controlled Supreme Tribunal and the rest of the court system to virtually disable the opposition-controlled Legislature, all while subverting sanctions imposed by the United States, the European Union, and other countries. More importantly, in the meantime, Venezuela lost over a quarter of its population to migration, a trend that remains to this day.

Venezuela's regime trajectory has continued its path away from democracy, veering towards autocratic consolidation until the present day. However, whether Venezuela is a *consolidated* authoritarian regime is still unclear. The current political moment remains uncertain: it is not clear when exactly the presidential election will take place, and whether the opposition will have a meaningful opportunity to contest the regime. It is also not clear who will be the main opposition presidential candidate: if it will be María Corina Machado, elected in primary elections in October 2023 and who is (at the time of writing) banned from running, or if it will be another candidate representing a (unified or fragmented) opposition. We do not know if all (or some of) the external sanctions will be lifted, and what awaits to the Venezuelan economy. And, despite looking organized and cohesive, we do not know whether the internal forces of Madurismo will hold.

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How do we approach contemporary Venezuela as an autocratic regime? How do we make sense of its trajectory towards authoritarianism? An excellent start for interested scholars, journalists, experts, or anyone with a modicum of interest in the Venezuelan case, is this excellent new book by Javier Corrales, *Autocracy Rising: How Venezuela Transitioned to Authoritarianism* (Brookings Institution Press, 2022). It is a formidable book—engaging, authoritative, well documented, evidently made with a keen eye to both understand the Venezuelan case, and to provide novel theoretical and methodological tools to approach the study of countries experiencing democratic backsliding in other contexts, especially those at risk of becoming full-fledged autocracies (or are already so). Corrales' book is a careful work, sensitive to the realities experienced by Venezuela and its people in the last few years, while also highlighting key aspects that need to be borne in mind to continue assessing the regime's trajectory now and in the future.

The book engages with the scholarship of backsliding, autocratization, and regime survival, addressing the recent Venezuelan regime trajectory by focusing on two key variables: the party system and the ruler's control of the state and coercive institutions. The first key argument refers to systems that experience democratic backsliding. Corrales argues that 1) "Democratic backsliding is more likely under conditions of APSF", i.e., *Asymmetrical Party System Fragmentation* (APSF), meaning "the emergence of a ruling party that is electorally strong and unified with an opposition that is fragmented or uncompetitive" in the presence of an illiberal president (p. 13), and, 2) *Institutional capturing*: "for democratic backsliding to occur, the president must destroy or colonize the liberal democratic institutions his regime has inherited" (p. 14). According to Corrales, in the context of a troubled liberal democracy (like Venezuela's was when Chavismo started), a pro-incumbent APSF allows the executive to carry out an ambitious, transformative policy reform agenda without meaningful opposition, and the destruction or control of liberal democratic institutions leads to the opposition's diminishing ability to compete effectively.

Yet, the second main argument relates to countries where democratic backsliding is succeeded by authoritarianism—as happened in Venezuela. Corrales observes that, for this transition to happen, the variables in question also play a key role, but the causal mechanisms are different. Paradoxically, "autocratization is more likely if the ruling party loses electoral competitiveness and the opposition rises" (p. 14). This new party system "gives the ruling party an incentive to take desperate measures," which can only happen if the regime counts with "sufficient autocratic institutional reservoirs" and the ability to employ them (even in innovative ways, as Corrales argues towards the end of the book). For reference, these arguments are nicely summed up in Tables 1–3 (page 17).


Autocracy Rising develops these arguments over the course of eight chapters. Following an introductory chapter (Chapter 1), in which the book's central tenets are first rehearsed, Chapter 2 discusses the concept of democratic backsliding as an all-encompassing attack on democracy, typically led by the executive and

characterized by autocratic legalism (a concept he first advanced in prior work as the “use, abuse, and non-use [. . .] of the law in service of the executive branch”) (Corrales 2015, 38). Next, Corrales explains changes in Chavismo’s APSF—the ruling party’s loss of popularity and the rise of the opposition—by focusing on two key explanations: Venezuela’s protracted and dramatic economic deterioration (Chapter 3), and the opposition’s success at party building strategies (Chapter 4). The latter is particularly important. Like other recent works of comparative relevance focused totally or partially on Venezuela Gamboa (2022) and Jiménez (2023), Corrales turns our attention to the importance of opposition strategic choices to account for the regime’s trajectory towards re-democratization or else.

Next, Chapter 5 looks in greater detail at the transition from semi-democracy to full-fledged authoritarianism in Venezuela, in other words how Maduro survived the crisis. The chapter surveys how Maduro employed autocratic policies, building on institutional changes and practices inherited from the Chávez era, namely authoritarian “institutional reservoirs.” This included purging the party to ensure its loyalty; (re)packing the courts to engage in autocratic legalism and ensure regime support; sidelining the opposition-dominated legislation; engaging in worse and more numerous electoral irregularities; expanding censorship; enhancing repression; purging and reorganizing the military, and further reducing civil society. This chapter is a thorough overview of Maduro’s authoritarian toolkit in action. Chapter 6 compares Venezuela with Nicaragua, Colombia, and Ecuador, helping to understand the Venezuelan case in comparative perspective and serving as a great starting point for cross-national analyses on the topic, while Chapter 7 looks in detail at one of the regime’s most distinctive features: how it innovated to survive the crises, such as by “granting existing institutions the ability to perform a variety of functions traditionally reserved for other institutions,” which Corrales calls “function fusion.” Chapter 8 offers conclusions.

I have no reservations to recommend Corrales’ *Autocracy Rising* as an essential book to understand contemporary Venezuelan politics, and as a major contribution to comparative politics, especially to students of political regimes and party systems. Corrales’ book will also be of great interest to legal scholars interested in the role of the law in democratic erosion/backsliding and modern autocracies, in particular comparative constitutionalism scholars interested in the use of constitutions, law and judicial institutions as tools for autocratic governance (see Sanchez-Urribarri 2024). The book functions very well as an overview or introduction to Venezuela’s current political moment and is a very useful springboard to engage in discussions about democratic backsliding and autocratization in comparative perspective, both in Latin America and elsewhere. This last contribution might well be the longest lasting. As I type the last words of this review, I read about Bukele’s (unconstitutional) reelection in El Salvador. Official results have not been announced, but he is already claiming to have won with over 85% of the vote. Then, I notice the Constitutional Council of Senegal’s decision to ban prominent opposition members from running in the 2024

elections. News about democratic backsliding do not seem to stop, in Latin America or elsewhere, so works like Corrales' seem more relevant and pressing than ever.

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