



Political Survival and... Authoritarian Consolidation? The Maduro Government and Venezuela's Political Crisis

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In the ten years between the election of President Nicolás Maduro in 2013 and 2023, Venezuela experienced a protracted, sustained deterioration of its regime from a hybrid regime towards autocracy. This autocratization was accompanied by hyperinflation, economic contraction, food scarcity, and a social and humanitarian crisis that led over seven million Venezuelans to migrate – over a fifth of the country's population. Maduro experienced an ongoing confrontation with his emboldened opponents, especially after the opposition's success in the legislative elections of 2015. However, the Maduro regime managed to block a presidential recall referendum (2016); created, organized, and established a pro-regime Constituent Assembly to subvert existing political authorities (2017); and manipulated subnational (2017) and then presidential elections (2018) to deepen its power. All of this, whilst

stifling the opposition's legislative efforts, relying on a regime-friendly Supreme Tribunal packed with pro-government judges, and relying on the military establishment for cover.

Thus, the regime successfully thwarted subsequent opposition efforts to remove Maduro and reinstate democracy, despite the opposition's refusal to acknowledge Maduro's 2018 reelection and their appointment of Juan Guaidó, President of the National Assembly, as interim president in January 2019. This move was supported by dozens of countries including the United States, most Western powers, and various Latin American nations, which recognized Guaidó as interim president. The US and its allies imposed economic sanctions on the regime to apply pressure and encourage a breakdown of the regime coalition. Despite these efforts, Maduro maintained his grip on power, moving the country's governance toward increasingly authoritarian methods amid subsequent protests and incidents. As a result, Nicolás Maduro appears to have solidified his hold on power in post-pandemic Venezuela, making the prospect of restoring democracy highly unlikely.

This paper aims to investigate the extent to which Maduro has consolidated a fully-fledged authoritarian regime and in what ways. Has he simply maintained his position as president, solidified his power, become more authoritarian, or pursued alternative approaches? Several scholars have examined Maduro's ability to survive amidst crisis and international policies aimed at his removal. They have noted the regime's increasing authoritarianism (Corrales, 2020; Salmerón & Salmerón, 2019; Corrales, 2023; Romero, 2020; Bull & Rosales, 2020; Penfold, 2023). However, can we confidently state that Venezuela under Nicolás Maduro has become a fully consolidated autocracy? What aspects of autocracy are consolidated, and what are the implications?

The answer to these questions depends on how we define authoritarian consolidation—a concept where, surprisingly, there has been limited scholarly work to date and a lack of consensus prevails. As we explain below, regime consolidation is a widely discussed concept in the context of *democratic* consolidation, but not so much with regards to *authoritarian* consolidation. Studies that do exist tend to focus on authoritarian consolidation in specific cases, including those of Russia, Nicaragua, several ex-Soviet republics, Turkey, Rwanda, and Middle East and North Africa (MENA) states (Lankina, 2009; Gel'man, 2015;

Stuenkel, 2021; Ambrosio, 2014; Bedford, 2017; Akçay, 2021; Rafti, 2008; Badran & Turnbull). However, scholars who have considered the issue of Nicolás Maduro's government survival in Venezuela have not specifically addressed the issue of whether, and to what degree, the regime has consolidated (Rosales & Jiménez, 2021).

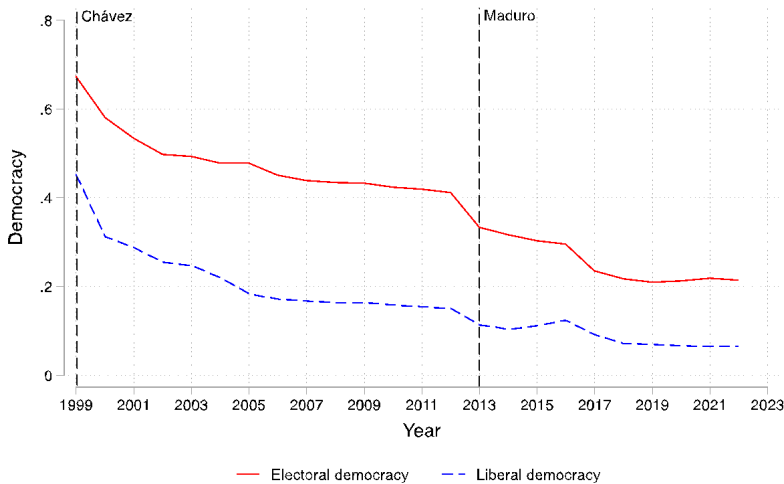
Thus, this article contributes to the study of Venezuela's political regime under Maduro and, more importantly, to the broader question of authoritarian consolidation in comparative perspective. We grapple with the definition of authoritarian consolidation and its complexities, arguing for a multi-dimensional concept as the optimal approach to capture the different logic and dynamics involving regime consolidation. Moreover, we initiate a conversation about the challenges of measuring this concept, with the intention of analyzing the intricacies of the Venezuelan case. We approach Venezuela under Maduro as an authoritarian polity, where different levels and configurations of consolidation have taken place at different points in time and in different respects, in the context of (unsuccessful) threats to the regime's survival. Moreover, we unpack the relationship between crisis survival and consolidation, two related but distinctive processes.

This research is structured as follows: After an introductory section, we delve into the democratic erosion and autocratization paths that Venezuela underwent since 1999, with special attention given to the Nicolás Maduro era (2013-present). The section below synthesizes prior studies on regime consolidation, with attention to the extensive literature on democratic consolidation prior to exploring the developing field of authoritarian consolidation. Furthermore, we draw from this literature to present our own multidimensional conceptualization of authoritarian consolidation, which examines various aspects of the regime's institutional landscape, as well as its domestic and international relations, and state-society relations in an autocratic environment. Subsequently, we analyze the process of authoritarian consolidation in Venezuela during the Maduro regime. We introduce various areas of relevance to better understand the phenomenon of authoritarian consolidation over time. The final section provides insights into potential questions and concepts for future studies on authoritarian consolidation, specifically in the Venezuelan context.

Venezuela's Regime under Nicolás Maduro: Democratic Erosion and Autocratic Rule

Many scholars and political analysts contend that Venezuela has undergone democratic erosion and gradually turned authoritarian since Hugo Chávez assumed the presidency in 1999. While there is general consensus in the literature regarding the overall path and major phases involved, which encompasses a crisis democracy, a hybrid regime, a competitive authoritarian regime, and finally, an overtly autocratic polity, there are notable differences of opinion concerning the exact characteristics of these phases or regime types, the precise moments when transitions from one form of governance to another occurred, and the defining features they embodied, among other specific details.

Scholars of Venezuelan politics have long been divided on the democratic nature of the regime, and little consensus exists, even among those who agree on the democratic erosion argument. However, there is little doubt that both electoral democracy and liberal democracy have decreased in Venezuela since 1999. Figure 1 from the Varieties of Democracy project illustrates this, showing Venezuela's transition from a flawed democracy to a hybrid regime and ultimately to authoritarianism. Despite the nature of the regime trajectory, other features of the regime, such as their stability, potential for change, and the level of consolidation, also spark significant disagreements (Benigno, 2016). This process unfolded over a period of 25 years amidst a tumultuous political history riddled with multiple critical junctures. In the upcoming sections, a succinct overview of this procedure will be presented, outlining significant steps utilized in subsequent analyses.



Source: VDem v13

Figure 1. The Evolution of Venezuelan Democracy (1999-2023)

Democratic Erosion under Chávez (1999-2013)

Following a decade of turmoil, Hugo Chávez's electoral victory in 1998 marked the termination of a prolonged era of representative democracy in Venezuela, and instigated a new epoch in Venezuelan politics (Ellner, 2008; McCoy & Myers, 2004). Chávez's political vision encompassed a blend of socialism, populism, nationalism, and Pan-American *Bolivarianismo*. Widely popular and with majority support in the country's National Assembly, Chávez adopted a majoritarian-style, plebiscitary interpretation of democracy that largely ignored the views and values of the political opposition. He relied on a polarized discourse that blamed the opposition and key elite groups for the country's crisis, and proceeded to change and subsequently dismantle Venezuela's democratic institutions.

In 1999, the changes began with a constitutional reform via a constituent assembly. Chavez embarked on a major institutional reform exercise, dismantling the country's key democratic institutions and practices based on a permissive interpretation of constituent power theory (García S., et al., 2008). Politically, Hugo Chávez concentrated power and removed checks on his socialist agenda by installing loyalists

in the courts and military, integrating the armed forces into politics, and dismantling independent media. Additionally, he exerted control over other public institutions by appointing supporters to the Supreme Court, Electoral Council, and other independent authorities. After a period of political turmoil involving a failed coup in April 2002 and a significant strike later that year, Chávez successfully withstood a contentious recall referendum in 2004 and subsequently increased his authority in the legislative elections of 2005. He then implemented a “21st Century socialist” plan meant to reshape Venezuela’s principal political institutions into a socialist state. Faced with rising opposition and economic stagnation, the Chávez regime gradually became more autocratic. Consequently, at the time of his death in 2013, Venezuela was no longer a liberal democracy nor a dictatorship, but rather a hybrid regime in which the political playing field was heavily skewed in favor of the governing United Socialist Party of Venezuela (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela, PSUV) (Mainwaring, 2012; Alarcón, *et al*, 2016).

Chávez’s leadership figure, his time in power, the changes he wrought, and his polarizing legacy have all been the focus of extensive scholarly work in the social sciences (Ellner, 2008; Corrales & Penfold, 2011). Yet Venezuela’s collapse has continued unabated under his anointed successor, Nicolás Maduro, descending from a hybrid regime into authoritarianism with restricted civil liberties, fraudulent elections, and widespread repression of political opposition (Polga-Hecimovich, *et al.*, 2017; Corrales, 2023; Pantoulas & McCoy, 2019). This latter process needs further consideration as a distinct phase – one in which Chavismo’s democratic erosion continues, but where special attention also needs to be paid to the development of autocracy-building and the establishment of authoritarian logics and practices as the backbone of the regime.

Nicolás Maduro’s Embrace of Autocracy

How exactly did this process of democratic erosion and autocratic consolidation unfold under Maduro? Why was it a distinct phase from the previous one under Chávez? And what are the key areas to observe to make sense of the process of autocratic consolidation that has taken place under his rule? There are three interrelated keys to understand

the need for enhancing authoritarian control at the expense of democratic institutions: The collapse of the Venezuelan economy, the domestic/external opposition's increasing influence against Maduro, and the instability of Maduro's own coalition with the wide range of actors that coexist within Maduro's regime. There are more factors to assess, but these are essential factors linked to the process of survival and consolidation of Venezuela's regime (and political regimes more generally).

The varying degrees of influence of each factor throughout the regime and their respective roles in the downfall of Venezuelan democracy are subject to debate. Maduro's inability to effectively respond and preserve his ruling against the multidimensional threat within a competitive authoritarian regime at the time, explains the collapse of Venezuela's remaining arenas for democratic contestation. This emphasizes the need for further safeguarding and managing his rule through the formalization and routinization of autocratic practices. The architecture of this authoritarian regime has its roots in the process of democratic deterioration that occurred before, but also reflects new and distinctive ideas and initiatives.

The first important factor to note is Maduro's lack of popular support in comparison to his predecessor. With less charisma than Chávez and facing a troubled economy, Maduro's ten-year tenure has been rife with turmoil, and social mobilization against his rule has been ongoing. Since taking power in 2013, Maduro has faced significant opposition in the form of massive street protests occurring in February 2014, September 2016, April 2017, and January 2019. However, these demonstrations did not significantly persuade Maduro to enter into negotiations. Rather, the Maduro regime responded with increasingly intolerant and repressive measures. He utilized the state security apparatus against the populace in what a July 2019 report from the United Nations' human rights commission confirmed was a tactic "aimed at neutralizing, repressing, and criminalizing political opponents and those critical of the government" (UNHCHR, 2019). This not only entailed a strategy of criminalizing certain opponents, but also establishing an environment that normalized political abuse against protesters. As a result, the likelihood of facing punishment, physical violence, and even death became common and unpredictable.

The opposition's growing influence resulted in a significant win during the 2015 legislative elections, securing control of at least two-thirds of Parliament. Nonetheless, with the aid of a newly-staffed Supreme Court, the Maduro administration voided the National Assembly, which was under the opposition's command (Sánchez U., 2016; Sánchez U., 2022). The judiciary, long under regime control, aided in eroding the hybrid regime's remaining democratic features and either ignored or supported the regime's adoption of autocratic measures (Brewer-Carias, 2021). Thus, in response to domestic opposition in 2016, the government delayed regional elections and halted an opposition-initiated recall referendum against Maduro. Additionally, military officials were more extensively integrated into national leadership roles and the detention of political dissidents was heightened (Alarcón *et al.*, 2016). Next, in March 2017, Venezuela's Supreme Court of Justice (Tribunal Supremo de Justicia, TSJ) announced its intention to take on the parliamentary functions of the opposition-controlled National Assembly. However, internal regime pressure ultimately caused the TSJ to retract this decision. By that time, the Supreme Tribunal, which was reliably pro-government, had effectively hindered the Assembly's constitutional prerogatives. It had decided dozens of cases against the legislature, which was a remarkable instance of "authoritarian judicial activism" (Sánchez U., 2024).

Following ongoing protests, in 2017, the president called for drafting a new constitution under a handpicked, non-democratic National Constituent Assembly (ANC). Ostensibly, this was to re-write the country's 1999 Political Constitution, but in reality, it sought to create a pro-government legislative body to supersede the opposition-controlled National Assembly (Boersner, 2020). On July 30, 2017, the government carried out elections for representatives to a National Constituent Assembly (ANC) which were widely considered fraudulent. The government claimed a turnout of 8.5 million people, while opposition, independent analysts, and the company that built and managed the electronic voting machines (Smartmatic) estimated a participation of 2.2-3.6 million. It is likely that the government also perpetrated fraud in the long-delayed gubernatorial elections that finally took place on October 15, 2017, and especially in the presidential elections that were held in May 2018. These events were denounced in Venezuela and abroad as lacking electoral integrity, and as pivotal steps for Maduro to

retain power in a context of crisis. Meanwhile, the country's economy continued to falter, with ongoing hyperinflation and a scarcity crisis that showed no signs of improvement.

Blocked from using legislative prerogatives and appealing to constitutional channels to remove Maduro, the opposition deployed a comprehensive strategy to delegitimize and replace the Maduro administration. In an effort to unseat Maduro, the National Assembly appointed Juan Guaidó as the country's interim leader in January 2019. More than 50 governments, including the United States, Canada, and most of South America, recognized Guaidó as the legitimate president of the country. This sparked a prolonged struggle for power amidst a time when loyalties to the regime were being questioned (with many politicians and high-profile officials speaking out against the regime). Nevertheless, Maduro managed to remain in power through repressive tactics, with the backing of a group of influential civilian allies and high-ranking military personnel. A rebellion on April 30, 2019 and a maritime infiltration in 2020 by Venezuelan dissidents and American mercenaries called Operación Gedeón or *Macutazo* ("Coup from Macuto") fizzled. These incidents resulted in widespread prosecution and increasingly violent measures to thwart any future attempts against the regime.

In the following years, Maduro continued to adopt authoritarian practices to retain power, relying on his control of the state apparatus as described above, and counting with the support of several authoritarian allies in the region and globally. He resisted international economic sanctions, continued unabated despite the catastrophic shrinking of Venezuela's GDP, and defied an ensuing humanitarian crisis that ended up forcing over millions of Venezuelans to leave their country (Rosales & Jiménez, 2021). Moreover, it was able to withstand the open rejection and denunciation of dozens of governments and political authorities, including the U.S. and the European Union, which refused to recognize Maduro as legitimate ruler and sided with Juan Guaidó. As of today, only a handful of governments fail to recognize Maduro as president – both Maduro's departure and re-democratization appear unlikely. Rather, the country seems to be on the path to autocratic stability (Aveledo, 2023; Corrales, 2023).

Will the authoritarian features of the Maduro regime continue to persist? To what extent are these characteristics and developments crucial for the regime's continued existence? It is necessary to differentiate between the regime's "crisis" in terms of the stability of its coalition, its ability to govern, and its legitimacy and support on one hand, and the emergence of new institutions and practices of an authoritarian nature on the other. Some of these characteristics seem more durable, consistent, and widely accepted than others, likely due to their reliance on past authoritarian practices or a lack of significant opposition to their establishment and enforcement. In contrast, certain traits appear less enduring. For example, the Maduro regime seems to utilize less overt political repression and violence to maintain its control (although violations of human rights persist).

As previously explained, Venezuela serves as an example of a "slow motion coup" in which a previously consolidated democracy slowly eroded into a hybrid regime and authoritarianism. This process was driven, in part, by the deliberate decisions of the ruling elite (Polga-Hecimovich et al., 2017). As a result, the regime transitioned from competitive authoritarianism to "hegemonic authoritarianism" (Alfaro, 2020; Arellano, 2023). The stability of this new phase remains to be seen. To what extent do the regime's main political actors support Maduro's authoritarian regime without significant opposition? In other words, how consolidated is the regime?

Conceptualizations of Consolidation

Whether or not the recent Venezuelan experience constitutes consolidation of authoritarianism depends on how the term is defined and operationalized. For example, McCarthy argues that Maduro consolidated preexisting authoritarian institutional and corporatist elements of Hugo Chávez's time in power *prior* to 2019 in an attempt to placate ruling elites (McCarthy, 2022). Meanwhile, Rosales and Jiménez contend that Venezuela experienced a process of authoritarian consolidation after 2019, maintaining that it was the result of the ruling elite successfully retaining power (Rosales & Jiménez, 2021). By contrast, Gandhi and Sumner's item response model (2020), which measures the consolidation of power rather than regime, suggests that

neither Chávez nor Maduro consolidated their individual rule as such. In what follows, we sum up key lessons from the existing scholarship on regime consolidation, including both democratic and authoritarian consolidation. As we will see, the former is much more developed than the latter, highlighting the need for additional research on autocratic consolidation in comparative perspective.

Democratic Consolidation

The absence of a consensus in describing Venezuela's regime status in recent decades highlights the conceptual confusion surrounding the concept of regime consolidation, and its misuse in the Venezuelan context. Scholars have engaged in a prolonged discussion on the meaning of regime consolidation, with various conceptualizations being introduced (Schmitter & Santiso, 1998; O'Donnell, 1996; Valenzuela, 1992). Reflecting on the lack of consensus regarding the term, Schedler identified the numerous attributes associated with "democratic consolidation" - with the literature primarily focusing on democracy - and stated that the concept had been constructed on "quicksand of semantic ambiguity" (Schedler, 2001). Thus, "consolidation" meets the criteria of an "essentially contested concept" (Gallie, 1956).

One key debate centers around whether "consolidation" should be viewed as a threshold to be achieved (i.e., the regime is deemed "consolidated") or as a process (i.e., the regime is currently undergoing or on a path towards consolidation). For those who conceive of consolidation in terms of a threshold, it is commonly thought of as the point at which a nation's regime is relatively secure from a political reversal, whatever "relatively secure" may mean. For instance, according to Samuel P. Huntington's "two-turnover test" (1991), democratic consolidation is achieved when the winning party of the initial election is defeated and peacefully hands over power to the subsequent winning party, which in turn also peacefully relinquishes power to the winners of a later election. The initial transfer of power through an election signifies the ability of voters to remove a leader and opposition parties to assume control of governance. The subsequent handover serves to exhibit the acceptance of democracy as a means of changing leaders rather than entire regimes, by society as well as the elite class alike.

Consequently, this type of approach regards non-reversal of regime type as evidence of consolidation.

Alternatively, for those who see it as a process, consolidation consists of transformation of the arrangements, norms, and contingent solutions of regime transitions into enduring structures with relationships that are reliably known, regularly practiced, and habitually accepted (Schmitter, 1995). This can involve legitimization of these arrangements and norms on several different levels, such as amongst parties, interest groups, and civil society. Democratic consolidation, then, would involve strengthening and solidifying democratic institutions, norms, and practices to ensure that democratic principles become deeply ingrained in a nation's political culture. Depending on the definition of democracy ones adopt, this could include a wide scope of institutions and practices. In a liberal-democratic perspective, though, democratic consolidation would usually involve holding free and fair elections—a minimum standard of democracy, according to most definitions—but also establishing strong rule of law, protecting human rights, promoting civil liberties, fostering a vibrant civil society, ensuring media freedom, and creating an independent judiciary (Diamond, 1999). Under this framework, regime persistence or survival over (a certain amount of) time are seen as evidence of consolidation (Schmitter & Santiso, 1998; O'Donnell, 1996).

Some approaches incorporate both aspects of this division. Linz and Stepan famously defined “democratic consolidation” as a political regime where democracy, consisting of a complex set of institutions, rules, incentives, and disincentives, becomes the only viable option (Linz & Stepan, 1996). This definition presupposes that reaching the democratic threshold necessitates a transformational process that ultimately leads to a state where no other regime alternatives or prospects are available to some extent. Of course, there appears to be a tautology in nearly all definitions of consolidation, whether conceptualized as a threshold or a process: the absence of breakdown or reversal is viewed as evidence of consolidation, while their presence signals non-consolidation. This outcome-based explanation impedes researchers from detecting different levels of consolidation during periods of persistence, thereby limiting its usefulness.

Authoritarian consolidation

There is a similar lack of consensus regarding the meaning of authoritarian consolidation. What is more, comparatively, there is much less written about authoritarian consolidation than democratic consolidation, and the concept is also far less developed in the academic literature than its democratic counterpart. While scholars flocked to explain the survival and entrenchment of democracy across the globe in the 1990s and 2000s, autocratization in the 2010s and 2020s has not necessarily occurred on the same scale. Instead, the third wave of autocratization has been marked more by backsliding into hybridism than outright authoritarianism (Bermeo, 2016).

Figure 2 visually illustrates this discrepancy. It builds a Google *n*-gram, which charts the frequencies of search terms in printed material, to plot the evolution of the phrases “democratic consolidation”, “authoritarian consolidation”, and “power consolidation”.

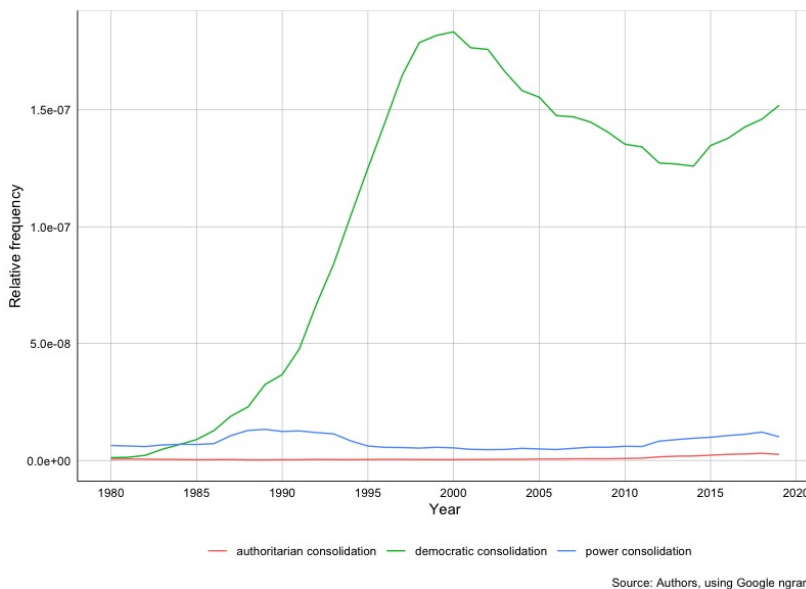


Figure 2. Google n-gram of subtypes of “consolidation” (1980-2019)

The usage of the term “democratic consolidation” has shown a pattern of growth that followed the onset of the third wave of democratization.

This occurred during the last two decades of the twentieth century and peaked in 2000, before beginning a steady decline. It is noteworthy that the use of this term far surpasses that of the other two search terms, which remain infrequently used over the 40-year timespan. Despite the processes of backsliding democracy and autocratization in the 2010s, there was little use of the term “authoritarian consolidation” during this period.

The limited scholarship available on authoritarian consolidation treats the concept as the antithesis of democratic consolidation, emphasizing attributes of persistence and non-reversal (Göbel, 2011; Croissant & Wurster, 2013; Ambrosio, 2014). According to Ambrosio (2014), authoritarianism is solidified and entrenched within a political system through a process that generates consistently pessimistic expectations for democratic regime change in the short-to-medium term. The term refers to a regime's tendency to solidify and strengthen its control over a country's political institutions, civil society, economy, and media.

As with democratic consolidation, authoritarian consolidation is considered to have a temporal component, with enduring regimes considered more consolidated, other things equal, those with less longevity. Although authoritarian survival and authoritarian consolidation are conceptually distinct, they are intertwined as far as survival is one empirically observable implication of consolidation. At the same time, authoritarian consolidation may not always guarantee stability in the longer term (Göbel, 2011). Some authoritarian regimes can persist for many years, while others may face eventual challenges and internal conflicts that may lead to their downfall or transformation. Indeed, passive persistence is not enough: as Croissant and Wurster defined it, “persistence is understood as the absence of change, e.g., the continuance or permanence of authoritarian subtypes” (Croissant and Wurster, 2013). By contrast, authoritarian consolidation seeks to understand the maturation of authoritarianism within a polity.

Differing slightly, Göbel conceptualizes authoritarian consolidation as “a deliberate state project to improve a regime's capabilities for governing society”, substituting coercion with governance. He distinguishes between three different kinds of power: despotic (the power to coerce one's will on the people), infrastructural (the power inherent in regulating society through institutions and organizations), and dis-

cursive (the power to make people want what the government wants them to want). He hypothesizes that the durability of authoritarian regimes increases to the extent that regime elites manage to enhance their infrastructural and discursive capabilities.

Power consolidation

In non-democratic political systems, autocrats close off alternative paths of political development and strengthen their relative rule within the system. This is in addition to the regime's ability to control the governance structure of the state, secure the cooperation of the ruling coalition, and prevent challenges from fellow, illiberal elites. One term for this phenomenon, referred to as "power consolidation," relates to an individual's influence in a hybrid or authoritarian government. Scholars utilizing this term typically analyze authoritarian consolidation in terms of power consolidation, considering the contrast between elite accommodation and power-sharing versus personalization and concentration of power. According to their perspective, the consolidation of power is primarily determined by who holds power and the degree of it, rather than the institutionalization of norms and practices within a regime. For instance, Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2018) devote an entire section of their book on dictatorship to the concept of "elite consolidation", which refers to the consolidation of power by leaders over military and security forces. Gandhi and Sumner (2020), on the other hand, write that "longevity is the result of settling into one of two equilibriums: one in which power is shared and the other in which it is consolidated".

Based on this discussion, then, there are several different competing understandings of what regime consolidation entails –especially authoritarian consolidation–, and of its key observable implications. There seems to be a focus on durability or longevity of the regime past a certain threshold, yet, durability and longevity of who, what, to what extent and to what ends? Plus, to what degree should a distinction be made between the consolidation of a ruler's influence in power, versus the consolidation of a regime as a whole? In what follows, we build on this discussion to offer our own understanding of authoritarian consolidation, prior to applying this notion to explain the Venezuelan case under Nicolás Maduro.

Dimensions of Authoritarian Consolidation

In our opinion, existing definitions and measures lack the ability to make qualitative distinctions in a regime's capacity to maintain and perhaps strengthen power. Therefore, it is necessary to differentiate between the consolidation of the regime and the consolidation of individual power. While these two phenomena are related, they are distinct and must be approached as such. Moreover, just as their democratic counterparts do, authoritarians must address the challenge of preserving their regime, securing it, and earning credibility from both the elite and general population. This holds true for contemporary politics as it has historically.

We propose a multi-faceted approach to authoritarian consolidation, based on the regime's ability to address three key aspects. The stability, acceptability, and embrace of these aspects by government actors and the population as a whole are important determinants of authoritarian consolidation. In our approach, these three domains indicate different levels of authoritarian consolidation. We aim to move away from an approach that sees authoritarian consolidation as a separate stage from lack of consolidation, as this is restrictive and potentially unhelpful. Adopting a multidimensional definition that highlights the dynamics of authoritarian consolidation allows for a more accurate classification and characterization of not only Venezuela under Nicolás Maduro, but also autocratic regimes worldwide.

To do so, we build on the seminal work of Schedler (1998), who identified five levels of democratic consolidation on the basis of several existing definitions and uses. These include: 1. Avoiding democratic breakdown, consistent with the classical meaning of consolidation ; 2. Avoiding democratic erosion, which is also consistent with the concern for regime survival, as well as the concern about the threat of more gradual regressions from democracy to semi democratic rule (O'Donnell, 1992); 3. Completing democracy by moving from electoral democracy toward liberal democracy, and therefore shifting from a democratic *government* to a democratic *regime*; 4. Deepening democracy by strengthening the roots of a liberal democratic regime; and 5. Organizing democracy through democratic institution building (Schmitter, 1995). On the basis of this synthesis, Schedler (1998) concluded that the concept of democratic consolidation is a "cluster

concept” without a meaningful common denominator, and advocated for returning to the concept’s classical concern with democratic survival. With this approach, regime consolidation at its most basic level refers to expectations of regime continuity and to nothing else.

This reasoning applies across all types of regimes. Autocrats, like their democratic counterparts, must prevent authority breakdown and erosion, deepen and organize the regime, and generate legitimacy among elites and the population, all to survive and ensure long-term stability. The expectation of regime endurance defines authoritarian consolidation. Survival is not always equivalent to consolidation as the strength of a regime and the challenges to its survival differ. Pridham (1996) proposed the concepts of “negative consolidation” as a passive type of consolidation through survival and “positive consolidation” as a more active consolidation that results from regime legitimation at elite and mass levels. At the same time, we contend that survival serves as the hub of a radial category (Collier, Mahon Jr., 1993), which in turn frames the larger spectrum of definitions within authoritarian consolidation.

This minimal definition is at the heart of the four levels of authoritarian consolidation that we identify. They are:

1. Avoiding authoritarian breakdown, the basic condition of regime survival upon which all other conditions are predicated;
2. Avoiding regime liberalization (i.e., authoritarian erosion), which captures the regime’s ability not only to survive, à la level 1, but avoid the risks associated with allowing free and fair elections or liberal democratic elements;
3. Completing authoritarianism, by shifting from an autocratic government or a diminished subtype of authoritarianism (i.e., competitive authoritarianism) to a fully autocratic regime;
4. Deepening authoritarianism, by eliminating the institutions of liberal democracy, and/or further consolidating formal and informal institutions associated with authoritarian logics.

The first two categories constitute the “negative” notions of consolidation, insofar as their concern is with eschewing rather than realizing change within the regime. As far as these definitions are concerned, maintenance of the status quo becomes the equivalent of consolida-

tion. To their detriment, since these conceptualizations are predicated on regime persistence, they cannot explain how authoritarians or their regimes have managed to survive. On one hand, the leader may share power with other political and economic elites, military officers, and/or other sectors of society, enabling their rule, while in the other, leaders may marginalize their supporting elites and concentrate power.

By contrast, the latter categories, which Göbel (2011) adopts as two of his three preferred definitions of authoritarian consolidation, constitute “positive” or “active” forms in which regime leaders aim to expand their influence and mitigate threats to their survival (Forcada, 2015). They explain how autocrats transition from a weakened form of autocracy to a hegemonic form of authoritarianism, solidifying their regime by eliminating institutional threats to its longevity.

It should be noted that our conceptualizations center on regime endurance and consolidation rather than individual power, as the latter can be independent of regime type. A leader can accumulate and concentrate power across various types of regimes. However, including both types would result in conceptual stretching, adding an attribute that reduces definition precision.

Moving on, let us examine whether Maduro's authoritarian regime is consolidated, considering the above-mentioned processes. Before proceeding, it is important to note that consolidation does not necessarily imply stabilization. On the contrary, consolidation and stabilization represent two separate concepts. While it is arguable that a consolidated regime will generally lead to stability, and conversely, stable regimes could be in a continual state of non-consolidation, this is not always the case. In the realm of consolidation, we are referring to institutions, norms, and practices internalized by a group of political actors, consisting of prominent members of the ruling coalition as well as members of the political opposition, in addition to other external actors and the entirety of the citizenry. While stability, defined as the absence of political turmoil or conflict, can be a crucial element in consolidation and vice versa, these are separate conceptual constructs.

Evaluating Authoritarian Consolidation in Venezuela

Maduro rose to power in a hybrid regime during unstable conditions, after his predecessor's death and facing a stronger opposition. Autocratization has been integral to both his survival strategy and his efforts to safeguard and consolidate his regime over time. While existing scholarly assessments hold valuable lessons, they remain inconclusive.

Rosales and Jiménez contend that Venezuela experienced a process of authoritarian consolidation after 2019, arguing that it is a result of the ruling elite successfully retaining power. Their logic is predicated on the fact that Maduro:

[...] (m)anaged to sustain elite cohesion, replace the previous opposition-controlled [National Assembly] with government loyalists in non-competitive elections held in December 2020, [and] has also initiated a transformation of the country's economy, from a highly centralized and statist system, to one with pockets of liberalized and deregulated markets. (Rosales and Jiménez, 2021)

They add that, "The autocratic consolidation of Maduro's regime has been catalyzed by its capacity to induce the atomization of the opposition" (Rosales and Jiménez, 2021, p. 432). However, beyond the specific mention of 'autocratic consolidation', they do not engage with what this notion implies, or with the consolidation literature. Their position on regime is consolidated needs to be inferred from the case narrative. While some aspects of their explanation correspond to the discussions articulated in the previous section, there is no explicit linkage with autocratic consolidation as a complex, protracted process that includes multiple coexisting aspects.

Similarly, Gandhi and Sumner's approach using the item response model for power consolidation arrives at a distinct conclusion. The point estimates obtained from their model suggest that while the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1948-1958) was "consolidated," Maduro's authoritarianism is not, revealing essential distinctions in the power arrangement between military and civilian dictatorships. The numbers for the first category range from 1.1 to 1.4 on a scale of -3 to 3, signifying high consolidation. The scores for the second category range from -2.2 to -2.6, indicating notably low levels of consolidation. See the appendix for the complete figures. Although this latent variable

modeling approach provides benefits in cross-country and longitudinal comparability, its shortcomings are apparent. Consolidation is depicted as a latent trait validated by numerous empirical manifestations, which may bear little relevance to the actual consolidation of the regime. Examples include determining whether the military constrains the executive and if the country's leader serves in two or more political positions within a given year (Gandhi & Sumner, 2020).

Moving beyond these interpretations, we evaluate Maduro's Venezuela in light of the four dimensions defined above: 1. Avoiding regime breakdown (i.e., authoritarian survival); 2. Avoiding regime liberalization (i.e., authoritarian erosion); 3. Completing authoritarianism; and 4. Deepening authoritarianism, i.e., by further organizing an autocratic regime over time.

1. *Avoiding regime breakdown*: With respect to this criterion, it is safe to claim that the Maduro regime has done very well in avoiding regime breakdown. Maduro has endured in power since coming to the office in 2013, and since turning to authoritarianism as a survival strategy—at least since the opposition gained control of the National Assembly following the 2015 legislative elections (perhaps the last elections that counted with a modicum of electoral integrity in Venezuela). Although he faced threats to his survival at different moments between 2016 and 2023, his and his government's mere persistence are evidence of authoritarian consolidation at this most basic level.

As we pointed out above, Maduro's regime managed to withstand severe threats against its rule at several points in time since 2013, and most recently in 2019 and 2020. Although these threats did not lead to regime change, they were credible and strong enough for many observers to claim (Forcada, 2015), over and over, that “Maduro tiene los días contados” (“Maduro's days are numbered”). However, these claims did not eventuate, even when facing extreme conditions.

A good example of major differences within the ruling coalition that implied possible fissures at a critical time was the open challenge of Venezuela's Attorney General, Luisa Ortega Díaz to the Venezuelan High Court's decision that sought to strip the opposition-controlled National Assembly of its prerogatives in late March 2017 (Mogollón & McDonnell, 2017). Once a relentless ally of the regime, Ortega

Díaz denounced the event as a rupture of the constitutional order, and became a major opponent until her dismissal by the Constituent Assembly in August 2017. At the time, Ortega Díaz's move was perceived as reflective of simmering discontent within Chavismo, and helped to embolden opposition forces and their efforts to press for change via increasing social mobilization (protests). However, the Maduro regime managed to keep its coalition from breaking down and resisted the efforts, even if this involved a decided anti-democratic step by convoking a Constituent Assembly on very dubious legal grounds and increasing its repression against protesters and other political opponents.

Perhaps the regime faced its most significant challenge in January 2019, when the National Assembly refused to recognize Maduro as president and instead declared Juan Guaidó as interim president until a democratic transition was achieved. In the following weeks, various countries denounced the regime and refused to recognize Maduro as president, supporting Guaidó instead as interim leader. In addition, there were protests against the regime demanding Maduro's resignation. This resulted in mounting threats against the regime. Furthermore, a joint effort by military officials and civilians called "Operación Libertad" took place from April 30 to May 2, aiming to force Maduro out of power. This attempt involved releasing opposition leader Leopoldo López and publicly condemning the regime by the director of the Venezuelan intelligence service (Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional, SEBIN), Manuel Figuera. Nonetheless, the Maduro regime remained in power and avoided collapse once more, resulting in failure.

Overall, these are but two examples of clear manifestations of rifts within Maduro's ruling coalition that did not lead to breakdown. And, again, Maduro continued to be successful despite deteriorating external conditions and overt efforts to break down the regime- a key aspect of authoritarian consolidation. As of 2023, this continues to be the case, the regime remains in place, and the prospects of breakdown are very dubious.

2. *Avoiding regime liberalization:* Maduro's noted ability to retain power has taken place whilst engaging in a process to avoid regime liberalization. The attempt to prevent regime liberalization involved managing and controlling the remaining "contestation arenas" that were a legacy

of Hugo Chávez's hybrid regime. Therefore, by 2013, the democratic system was heavily biased towards the regime in all pertinent areas, including but not limited to elections, the judiciary, the military, and the media. However, these domains and their institutions were subject to the authoritarian logics of the regime, thus preventing the political opposition, civil society actors, and the citizenry as a whole from effectively using them to democratize or further liberalize the regime. This effort is crucial for regime survival (see above) and essential to exerting authoritarian control over the Venezuelan state and society.

A good case in place is the judiciary and its key role to both block the legal route to challenge the regime, and serve as a tool to block other institutional mechanisms to hold the regime accountable. By the time Maduro came into power, the Venezuelan judicial system had already been subject to a process of creeping politicization and capture. With a strong record of deciding politically salient cases in favor of the regime, and with a judiciary staffed with judges who held informal connections of different sorts with the regime, there were no reasonable prospects of using legal recourse or try cases to challenge Maduro's authority. However, as explained in Sanchez Urribarri (2021), the court's support for the regime was not only *reactive* – that is, to defend the regime in the case of attacks – but *proactive*, i.e., to go out of its way to back Maduro's efforts against the opposition in different areas, and even act *motu proprio* to these ends. Perhaps the best example of this ongoing willingness to assert its authority in order to prevent regime liberalization was its ongoing effort since 2016 to block the opposition-controlled National Assembly, question its institutional legitimacy from its installation, and systematically decide against the Assembly over a hundred cases brought by pro-regime actors.

3. *Completing authoritarianism*: This third dimension pertains to fulfilling an authoritarian agenda, specifically, the establishment of institutions and practices that revolve around a particular form of authoritarian governance. This category involves authoritarian leaders reinforcing fundamental aspects of their regime, preventing liberalization efforts, and expanding their influence to promote authoritarianism as the primary authority. Debating whether this occurs in a particular country with specific regime conditions is a challenge as it involves defining and operationalizing specific thresholds. Additionally, determining when a regime's evolution is considered 'complete' is sensitive

to various understandings of its completion. Furthermore, considering the lack of transparency that often characterizes autocratic regimes, it is necessary to remain alert to unforeseeable or difficult-to-predict developments that may require updates to current status.

That being said, we contend that Maduro has yet to achieve his authoritarian goals in Venezuela. The regime's internal politics remain unstable, with influential actors vying for dominance within a constantly developing ruling coalition. Opposition forces have the means to prevent Maduro and his regime from achieving definitive stability, which creates the impression that the *Madurista* hegemonic autocracy has matured and is resistant to further changes. Although *Madurismo* has not yet realized a total authoritarian project, the regime has made significant strides in this direction in recent years. Whether the government will inevitably become a dominant regime - an outcome that appears increasingly probable - or settle into a regime that provides at least some meaningful participation to the opposition (beyond extremely restricted spaces) remains an unanswered question. However, to achieve this goal, it is essential for the government to persist in augmenting and organizing former and new authoritarian practices and techniques, which leads us to the subsequent point.

4. *Deepening and organizing authoritarianism.* Under this category, we assess the regime's capacity to reinforce its position and advance its governance objectives over time. Although this is a time-consuming process that requires monitoring the regime's trajectory, we can measure its performance by examining capacity levels at specific intervals relative to opportunities presented. Bearing this in mind, the *Madurista* regime is developing authoritarian institutions and practices openly. There is growing evidence that it is organizing its rule along these lines, and that authoritarian practices are increasingly occurring with sophistication.

Given the text already adheres to the principles and lacks context, the improved version is: A good example of this lies in the regime's increasing reliance on authoritarian allies and ideologically-minded governments worldwide to safeguard and expand its rule. In recent years, the Maduro administration has bolstered its formal and informal alliances with China, Cuba, Iran, Turkey, and Russia, forging integral connections with these nations to fortify its grip on power and

withstand pressures arising from economic instability and sanctions imposed by the United States and other Western countries (Arnson, 2021). These affiliations have assisted Maduro in navigating challenging circumstances and cementing his authority. These are not fleeting partnerships - they are crucial to the regime's future. Maduro has taken significant steps to establish itself as a committed ally of these powers in Latin America and worldwide.

Concluding Remarks

What is authoritarian consolidation? The regime of Nicolás Maduro has withstood numerous crises and has shifted towards authoritarianism, but has it truly coalesced into a consolidated autocracy? In this article, we survey the literature on regime politics to assess authoritarian consolidation. We provide a conceptual framework to evaluate the various dimensions of authoritarian consolidation from a comparative perspective and apply this theoretical lens to determine the extent to which the Venezuelan regime under Nicolás Maduro has consolidated. Our aim is to offer an objective assessment of the consolidation process, avoiding any subjective evaluation. We use a clear and concise language and follow conventional academic structure, adhering to consistent citation and footnote formatting. Additionally, we maintain a formal tone, precise word choice, and grammatical correctness. Finally, we strive for a balanced view, avoiding any biased or emotional language. This provides clarity not only in regards to Venezuela's path towards consolidating authoritarianism but also in assessing the changing authoritarian conditions in the region and worldwide. Ultimately, the issue of authoritarian trajectories and consolidation remains more crucial than ever, given governments such as Nicaragua under Daniel Ortega and El Salvador under Nayib Bukele, who, to cite two striking examples, have actively pursued the dismantling of democracy and engaged in autocratic practices.

Furthermore, our definition strives to encompass numerous facets or dimensions of authoritarian consolidation. Plus, survival is a critical component of consolidating authoritarian rule. If the regime collapses, consolidation becomes impossible. However, survival during crises is not the only relevant aspect. It is important to distinguish between

surviving crises and consolidating authoritarianism in the analysis.

Based on these premises and following our proposed multidimensional conceptualization, the Maduro government has not only avoided regime breakdown and regime liberalization—especially with respect to the key tenets of Maduro’s political survival and the regime’s ability to fend off attempts to liberalize it and seek re-democratization—but is also at work on both completing and deepening the regime. Between 2013 and 2020, there were overt attempts to challenge Maduro, and significant uncertainty existed about their prospects for success, reflecting the regime’s perceived weaknesses. By contrast, the paucity of legitimate threats to Maduro’s rule since 2020 suggests the opposite: that he is now firmly entrenched in power and no longer perceived as weak.

NOTAS

1. The views expressed herein are solely those of the authors and do not represent the views of or endorsement by the United States Naval Academy, the Department of the Navy, the Department of Defense, or the United States government.

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APPENDIX

Table A1. Latent variable model estimates of authoritarian consolidation in Venezuela. Source: Authors' estimates using model developed by Gandhi and Sumner

| Year | Leader | xhatmean |
|------|-------------------------|------------|
| 1948 | Carlos Delgado Chalbaud | 1.09968992 |
| 1949 | Carlos Delgado Chalbaud | 1.16024873 |
| 1950 | Marcos Pérez Jiménez | 1.31168187 |
| 1951 | Marcos Pérez Jiménez | 1.3765127 |
| 1952 | Marcos Pérez Jiménez | 1.38329201 |
| 1953 | Marcos Pérez Jiménez | 1.38979646 |
| 1954 | Marcos Pérez Jiménez | 1.3979046 |
| 1955 | Marcos Pérez Jiménez | 1.40055959 |
| 1956 | Marcos Pérez Jiménez | 1.40388675 |
| 1957 | Marcos Pérez Jiménez | 1.40230672 |
| 1958 | Wolfgang Larrazábal | 0.98623161 |
| 1999 | Hugo Chávez | -2.296793 |
| 2000 | Hugo Chávez | -2.43213 |
| 2001 | Hugo Chávez | -2.535955 |
| 2002 | Hugo Chávez | -2.580603 |
| 2003 | Hugo Chávez | -2.614659 |
| 2004 | Hugo Chávez | -2.626803 |
| 2005 | Hugo Chávez | -2.632853 |
| 2006 | Hugo Chávez | -2.62136 |
| 2007 | Hugo Chávez | -2.596426 |
| 2008 | Hugo Chávez | -2.574894 |
| 2009 | Hugo Chávez | -2.554278 |
| 2010 | Hugo Chávez | -2.532311 |
| 2011 | Hugo Chávez | -2.499668 |
| 2012 | Hugo Chávez | -2.446741 |
| 2013 | Nicolás Maduro | -2.196854 |
| 2014 | Nicolás Maduro | -2.333172 |
| 2015 | Nicolás Maduro | -2.413155 |
| 2016 | Nicolás Maduro | -2.449906 |
| 2017 | Nicolás Maduro | -2.477061 |
| 2018 | Nicolás Maduro | -2.48693 |
| 2019 | Nicolás Maduro | -2.492158 |
| 2020 | Nicolás Maduro | -2.49021 |

| | | |
|------|----------------|-----------|
| 2021 | Nicolás Maduro | -2.469556 |
| 2022 | Nicolás Maduro | -2.441171 |
| 2023 | Nicolás Maduro | -2.396957 |
