Developing Resilience in Authoritarian Contexts

Lessons From Venezuela in Comparative Perspective

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Developing Resilience in Authoritarian Contexts
Lessons From Venezuela in Comparative

Index

I. Introduction

Over half of the world's population currently lives under non-democratic conditions according to the most recent Varieties of Democracy data (V-Dem, 2020). Put simply, this means that millions of citizens across the globe cannot elect their representatives in free and fair, meaning competitive, elections. Furthermore, in these contexts, governments dismantle otherwise democratic institutions, curtail civil and political rights and assault civil society organisations (CSOs) to increase their hold onto power.[3] At the same time, today's authoritarian governments do not rule like past military dictatorships, which upon taking power in a violent manner, usually proceeded to shut down state institutions, close all space for participation and contestation and persecute or even kill their dissidents. Instead, autocrats have learned to use democratic institutions, such as elections, parliaments or electoral bodies, to gradually dismantle those same institutions and limit citizens' capacity to engage in public affairs. In other words, democratic backsliding does not occur overnight (Bermeo, 2016), but is rather a process during which non-democratic governments oftentimes use "*sophisticated*" strategies to autocratize.

This does not imply that authoritarian rulers do not use repression to increase their grip on power. They do so, however, through different means. Repression can either be overtly violent and may include the violation of physical and integrity rights, such as forces disappearances, killings, persecutions; and/or non-violent, which would include the restriction of civil and political rights, for example, through legislation (Escribà-Folch, 2013). Beyond being a theoretically interesting distinction, differentiating between types of repression is useful in practice in order to understand the capacities and limitations citizens have when challenging a non-democratic regime. That is, as social movement theory has explained, the "*opportunity structures*'' vary vastly in authoritarian or autocratizing countries; they can be more "*open*" (closer to democracy) or more "*closed*" (closer to autocracy) or completely "*closed*" (autocracy). It is important to understand the -often dynamic- opportunity structures because they will ultimately affect citizens' ability to organise, operate or succeed (Gandhi, 2008; Gandhi & Przeworski, 2007; Khagram et al., 2002; Magaloni & Kricheli, 2010; McAdam et al., 1996; Tarrow, 2011). For example, while autocratization has lately occurred in Brazil, Poland, Hungary, Bolivia or even the United States, non-democratic contexts are different and more advanced, for instance, in Nicaragua,Venezuela, China, Cuba or North Korea. In all of these countries the space for

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[3] We understand as "civil society" networks, groups or organisations that are independent from the state.

Developing Resilience in Authoritarian Contexts
Lessons From Venezuela in Comparative

action also widely differs: while in the latter three it is almost unviable to mobilize against the regime or defend human rights, in the remaining countries, with the exception of Venezuela or Nicaragua who only allow a limited presence of civic engagement as of 2021, these types of actions are tolerated.

If we believe there is a need to preserve democracy worldwide and are interested in knowing how democracy can be restored in countries where it has been dismantled, it is important to look at how civil society groups, and especially, Human Rights Organisations work in non-democratic environments. This matters because, as the democratisation literature shows, civil society groups can actually contribute to creating pressure from below in order to enact change (Stephan & Chenoweth, 2008; Tarrow, 2011).

Venezuela is an interesting case study to explore how CSOs have learned to survive under ever-increasing authoritarian conditions. Given that the country has transitioned from an electoral democracy back in 1998 to a hybrid regime and, finally, to an authoritarian regime, it allows us to isolate the mechanisms that organisations have found to operate in an ever-changing environment. In spite of the government's consistent efforts over the past two decades to silence dissident voices and control human interactions, Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro have faced large societal pushback. In this regard, Venezuela bears important lessons for societies that have undergone -or are in the process of experiencing- democratic backsliding. Additionally, given the multidimensional crisis, which beyond the political aspects now incorporates socio-economic decline, the collapse of public services, cultural and environmental damage, Latin America's largest migration flow in recent history and one of the world's largest displacement crises, as well as one of the world's ten worst humanitarian crises, this country can provide insights into particularly fragmented and troubled societes (IRC, 2021; UNHCR, 2021).

Venezuela's ongoing multidimensional crisis has been a domestic and international cause for concern for several years in a row now. Scholars, think tanks, NGOs and IGOs, just to name a few, have closely followed the situation on the ground and have published important pieces of scholarship and research highlighting the overall decay in terms of socio-economic, political or environmental issues. One major field of study and source of activism has been around the serious human rights violations that have been occurring on Venezuelan territory. As many local NGOs and IGOs, including Human Rights Watch or Amnesty International, or United Nations bodies, such as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and Independent Fact-Finding-Mission (FFM), and both the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, the Venezuelan state has engaged in serious human rights violations and alleged crimes against humanity.

Extrajudicial killings of peaceful protesters during the years 2014 and 2017; massive limitations and restrictions on residential public services and economic, social, cultural and environmental rights; restrictions and violations of the right to freedom of speech to the detriment of social communicators and people who express ideas on social networks; arbitrary detentions along with torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment in Venezuelan prisons; violations and attacks against human rights defenders for their actions; and the almost absolute loss of the independence of the Venezuelan judiciary, are just some examples of violations of fundamental rights in Venezuela that have been denounced by international organisations in recent years. In fact, a variety of indicators that measure the state of democracy show that as democracy has been deliberately eroded in Venezuela, state institutions have been used to engage in all types of human rights violations (Human Rights Watch, 2008, 2015; IACHR, 2018, 2019; OHCHR, 2020).

Yet, in spite of this increased repressive state behaviour and clearly reduced opportunity structures, human rights and CSO work has not declined, but quite to the contrary, spiked. Which mechanisms have they found to carry out their work in an increasingly violent and hostile environment? Using original evidence collected through a survey and semi-structured interviews with activists across Venezuela, this report will address this question.

This report will first identify the obstacles created by the government's increased non-democratic practices and will specify how these practices have impacted the work of human rights organisations. Then, we will show how the mixed use of domestic and international tools has allowed Venezuelan activist groups to develop resilience under these adverse conditions. By harnessing novel data gathered through a survey of 39 CSOs and Human Rights Organisations (HROs) and 32 semi-structured interviews with human rights activists,[4] we found that organisations in authoritarian contexts are capable of carrying out human rights work by deploying mainly three capacities: i) learning from past practices: ii) creating strong decentralized networks; and iii) establishing linkages with international partners.[5]

Our contribution is particularly relevant because it will be the first to bring together the most important voices within the Venezuelan human rights movement and account for both individual and collective experiences of human rights work carried out in a contemporary authoritarian setting. Furthermore, our approach and findings largely differ from other existing historical and descriptive analyses on civil society groups in Venezuela

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[4] The authors thank Leonardo Veronico for his research assistance and all CSO and HRO members who took the time to participate in this study.
[5] To guarantee participants' confidentiality and safety, we have removed all identifying features throughout the report.

in that it puts a particular emphasis on analysing how Human Rights Organisations can survive and thrive under highly repressive and violent circumstances. Beyond documenting human rights abuses, which is an incredibly important task in non-democratic settings, our report provides insights about the agency of human rights workers, and shows that in spite of high repression resilience and action are indeed possible.

In addition to our in-depth case analysis of Venezuelan human rights organisations, this report includes a cross-regional comparative component to evaluate how organisations have responded to democratic backsliding in Bolivia, Cuba and Nicaragua. This comparative dimension has helped us to identify singularities and/or similarities with other authoritarian regimes in Latin America, which have had different opportunity structures. In doing so, the report establishes potential patterns of resilience and present lessons for human rights movements across the region. Finally, with this study we aim to explain the ongoing conflict from a different angle and help bring the Venezuelan experience closer to CSOs, academics, policymakers, and international activists. This report also seeks to provide evidence-based insights to other human rights defenders who work in authoritarian settings and allow actors within the international community to make more informed decisions about how to best support HROs in non-democratic contexts.

The remainder of the report is organised as follows. First, we discuss existing scholarship on CSOs and present a brief history of the Venezuelan human rights movement, followed by a brief analysis of the current Venezuelan crisis and the challenges faced by human rights organisations. Then, we introduce empirical findings from Venezuela and discuss our contributions using existing research. Thereafter, we briefly compare the Venezuelan experience with the Bolivian, Cuban and Nicaraguan and finally, we conclude by summarising our main arguments, mapping out the need for further research and presenting recommendations for international actors and donors.

II. Challenges for Human Rights Organisations in Authoritarian Venezuela

Across disciplines and time, scholars have studied the behaviour of civil society groups and their impact on political systems, culture, international relations, and norm diffusion, among many other aspects (Finnemore, 1993; Kitschelt, 1986; Putnam, 1988). When looking at the nexus between civil society and democracy, some have argued that an active and organised civil society can promote and consolidate democracy by i) creating social trust (Fukuyama, 1995; Putnam, 1994); ii) empowering the citizenry by monitoring state behaviour and other interest groups (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2020; O'Donnell, 1998); and iii) promoting active citizen participation (Diamond, 1994). Although these actors can vary in terms of strength and goals, they are often essential in checking abuses of state power, preventing the resumption of power by authoritarian governments, and encouraging wider citizen participation and public scrutiny of the state.[6]

Before Hugo Chávez's first electoral victory in December 1998, Venezuela's emerging human rights movement was precisely dedicated to advancing human rights standards focused on civil and political rights and, at the same time, on economic, social and cultural rights, based on the idea of a society with capacities to generate impacts on and interactions with the Venezuelan State. Although Venezuelan democracy was far from perfect, the existing political system and "*rather open*" political structures allowed Human Rights Organisations to have access to and influence state behaviour. This was the case, for example, with the interactions between the civil society organisations Provea and Cofavic and the state during the final decade of the 20th century with respect to the "El Amparo" and "*El Caracazo*" massacres.

At first glance, it would be possible to claim that the Venezuelan human rights movement is not the strongest in the region, as it is not currently having a high impact on the issuance of state policies. However, it is important to highlight the fact that it has grown considerably in the quantity and quality of its work, at least in the last 15 years, by virtue of

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[6] This does not mean, of course, that *all* CSOs are per se "good" for democracy, which is why it seems important to distinguish between "democratic CSOs" and "non-democratic CSOs" (Bob, 2011; Kopecky & Mudde, 2002). Depending on their nature and behaviour, these groups can either have positive or negative effects on democracy and democratization. These scholars have also argued that CSOs can be used by (often authoritarian) governments for their own political purposes, and that they may use violence, disregard democratic rules and promote non-democratic ideas. In this report, however, we will study organisations that are committed to democratic norms.

the human rights crisis (IACHR, 2019) and the complex humanitarian emergency that Venezuela is experiencing (Civilis Derechos Humanos, 2017).

Looking at the Human Rights Movement (HRM) from a historical perspective allows us to identify the different challenges it has faced and successes it has achieved. During the first half of the 20th century, the HRM in Venezuela was overshadowed by the primacy of the military in power. The desire for democracy and the materialization of freedoms had a tenuous evolution only after the death of General Juan Vicente Gómez in 1935. The term "*human rights*" only became relevant worldwide after the Second World War, when the concept was formally coined in international law and international relations (Nikken, 2016).

In a historical analysis, Ligia Bolívar and Raúl Cubas (2009) characterized the evolution of the Venezuelan HRM in four stages: a) a first stage of democratic restoration; b) a second stage of democratic restoration and human rights; c) the 90s; and d) the beginning of the new century (Bolívar & Cubas, 2009).

a)   **First Stage of Democratic Restoration:** During this stage, which lasted from the 1960s to the beginning of the 1970s, there was a significant deployment of state security forces to persecute leftist movements that had taken up arms to challenge the democratic political system established in 1958. The abuses committed by the State during this period were denounced by a few groups and committees that were deeply concerned about this situation, but they were subjected to stigmatization and criminalization by the State, which characterized them as "*subversive, communist and destabilizing*" (Bolívar & Cubas, 2009).

b)   **Second Stage of Democratic Restoration and Human Rights:** This stage developed within the framework of a Venezuelan democracy with greater political stability, although with the onset of economic instability in the country, specifically in the mid-1980s. The participation of Catholic church networks in activism and social protection stands out in this era. Similarly, two historical organisations of the Venezuelan HRM, the Venezuelan Program of Education-Action in Human Rights (Provea) and the Committee of Relatives and Victims of the Events of February and March 1989 (Cofavic) emerged (Interview 11, November 2020).

c)   **The 90s:** Bolívar and Cubas (2009) define these years as a stage of growth and maturation, characterized by proactive and purposeful work to confront State institutions over their national and international obligations regarding the protection of human rights. Perhaps an obvious effect of the maturation of the movement at that time was the beginning of networking, evidenced by the creation

Developing Resilience in Authoritarian Contexts
Lessons From Venezuela in Comparative Perspective

of the *Foro por la Vida* (Forum for Life), an association of Human Rights Organisations which still exists today (Bolívar & Cubas, 2009).

d) **The Beginning of The New Century:** Since the late 1990s, the HRM has faced increasing challenges. The new century began with the reconfiguration of political forces in Venezuela and with the hope of radical changes that would increase social inclusion and fight systemic corruption. At first, the rewriting of the Constitution in 1999, the project to reform the judiciary and the accentuation of social policies generated high expectations within the HRM. However, over time the Human Rights Organisations have had to denounce the state's lack of compliance with its domestic and international obligations.

The fourth stage best reflects the reality of the human rights movement at the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century, due to its proximity in time and the similarity of the dynamics of the relationship between the Venezuelan State and the people subject to its jurisdiction.

We build on the last classification by Bolívar and Cubas to argue that since the non-democratic period, which began during the mid-2000s when the government engaged in democratic-backsliding practices, the HRM in Venezuela has become stronger, rather than weaker, and has increased its capacity for interconnection and coordination. During this last stage of growth and resilience, it has also carried out important advocacy work with international human rights protection organisations, such as the Inter-American Human Rights System and the United Nations (Interview 8, October 2020).This does not mean that it is the most organized and strongest movement in the region, but it does mean that, in its evolutionary format, it is more robust than it was in the last century.

Beyond the non-democratic context, in which the HRM has been operating, another factor that has affected its development and the interaction among NGOs and CSOs is the high levels of polarization in Venezuela. Since its early days, the incumbent government has tried to co-opt existing social movements and NGOs and has also created its own pro-government organisations, thereby excluding and often attacking independent non-state actors. This has served to antagonise and discredit independent organisations, but also to advance the government's agenda on a domestic and international level (Interview 25, December 2020). Another aspect that stands out in recent times is the government's reliance on a narrative based on the "*protection of human rights*" and consequently, the creation of new organisations dedicated to that matter. The hypothesis of this behaviour is the increase in protection needs in a country in crisis like Venezuela; and based on thes

crisis, the increase in international cooperation for the country, which makes work on human rights and humanitarian issues more desirable.

Scholars of democratization have incorporated civil society actors into their elite-centered studies of transitions and have recognised their capacity to shape political outcomes (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986; Przeworski, 1991). Some argue that strong civil society groups can be crucial players *before* a democracy is installed, that is, during processes of liberalization or transition to democracy (Diamond, 1994; Way, 2014). Cross-regional examples, such as Tunisia, Poland, Sudan or Guatemala illustrate how CSOs can represent spaces of civic engagement, deliberation, trust building, (legal) mobilization, and humanitarian assistance, among many others. By organising citizens, pushing for reforms, documenting and denouncing state abuses, collecting testimonies, among other efforts, civil society groups can be key in the struggle for democracy in non-democratic systems (Khagram et al., 2002; Way, 2014).

Given their potential impacts on political change, civil society groups, including human rights organisations, represent a threat to autocrats. So much so that several authoritarian regimes have sought to close the opportunity structures for these actors by imposing legal constraints, persecuting, criminalising or even killing activists (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; McAdam et al., 1996; Tarrow, 2011). However, as evidenced across the world, human rights work does not cease to exist in non-democratic contexts. As in other cases, in Venezuela, the government has attempted to dismantle CSOs through violent and non-violent mechanisms. Since 2004, for example, the government has sought to pass laws that would curtail international funding and cooperation, for example, through the National Assembly controlled by the ruling party. Attempting to control international funding, which is often essential in facilitating the creation of independent organisations, is a key mechanism used by authoritarian incumbents to weaken a country's capacity to organise and resist. At the same time it has tried to polarize and divide the Venezuelan civil society into "*loyalists*" and "*political enemies*" to silence critical voices. Also, in recent years the barriers to active participation have increased due to the inability to legally register new organisations. Furthermore, public officials and state representatives have used state media to engage in the systematic stigmatization and criminalization of human rights defenders and civil society organisations. State forces have also engaged in arbitrary arrests of human rights workers, as occurred with five members of the humanitarian organisation Azul Positivo in January 2021. Yet in spite of these efforts, the state has not succeeded in its efforts to silence and demobilise CSOs.

Next we will explore the challenges that Human Rights Organisations in Venezuela have faced during recent times, and will subsequently explain which strategies they have developed in order to operate in the current authoritarian context.

A) Venezuela's Multidimensional Crisis in Brief

Venezuela is going through an unprecedented and complex humanitarian emergency, deep-rooted in multidimensional factors, including social, economic, political, cultural, and environmental factors. This context is causing a constant severe impact on living conditions and people's rights in the country. As part of the emergency, Venezuela also faces a broad panorama of generalized violence and high levels of crime and impunity, and it has become one of the most unsafe countries in the world, all against the backdrop of the lack of rule of law. The crisis has notably affected several aspects of state and public affairs, including,in general terms, the country's institutional, economic, social and political aspects. In many ways, the government is exercising unmeasured control and power, thereby constantly signaling its authoritarian characteristics. It has also been found to have linkages with the control by criminal and irregular violent armed groups across the Venezuelan territory. In short, Venezuela seems to have become a fragile state.

Institutional deterioration affects each of the branches of public power. Since the approval of the 1999 Venezuelan constitution, and the institutional transformation entailed by its constituent process, the governing party and the head of the national executive branch - the President of the Republic- have sought the *de iure* or *de facto* control of each of the other branches of power, to rule without checks and balances. In fact, for several years and significantly more intense and widespread since 2015, the government has bypassed the essential principles of the separation of powers and the real existence of checks and balances that control and give accountability to the ruling of executive power, just as it has left aside the imputation of responsibility for the misuse of power in violations of people's rights (IACHR, 2018, 2019).

Sources repeatedly reported the lack of access to real and fair justice and other human rights official institutions as the main obstacle for advocacy in the country: "*The biggest obstacle we have right now is how to get access to justice. That is to say, the organs of justice are not functioning. We provide legal assistance, the situation worsened with the pandemic, then these bodies were closed, they were not providing the service, we have some cases that were in trial and were going on and they were paralyzed*" (Interview 20, November 2020).

With regard to the status of democracy and freedom in the country, according to the 2020 Global Freedom Scores issued by Freedom House, Venezuela qualifies as a non-free

country with a score of 16 out of a possible 100 (2/40 on Political Rights; 14/60 on Civil Liberties) (Freedom House, 2020). Similarly, the 2020 Democracy Index of The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) ranks Venezuela 140th out of 167 countries. falling from its 2005 classification as a "*hybrid regime*" with a score of 5.42/10 in the category of democratic conditions, to its classification as an authoritarian regime with a score of 2.88/10, based on surveys and interviews that measure 60 indicators on electoral, political, governance and liberty conditions (The Economist, 2020).

At the political level, Venezuela has experienced a consolidation of authoritarian institutions over time. The ruling party, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), has successfully gained control over all state institutions, leaving its citizens with no independent institutions to appeal to. In recent years, the regime has attempted to consolidate itself through direct or indirect control of the other branches of public power. The lack of independence of the judiciary and the Public Prosecutor's Office is evidenced by how they are politically used to carry out extrajudicial executions, arbitrary detentions, torture, cruel treatment, threats, judicial harassment and politically motivated persecution against high- and low-level political dissidents as well as all those who criticize the government, whether in the media, organized civil society or NGOs (ICJ, 2017, 2019; OHCHR, 2015). The government has consistently censored and persecuted the free and independent press, leading in various indicators that categorise Venezuela as a country with almost no freedom of expression. For example, the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index 2020 ranks Venezuela 147/180 (OHCHR, 2019; RSF, 2021).

The Rule of Law Index, published by the organisation World Justice Project, ranks Venezuela among the worst of 128 countries studied in terms of rule of law and justice, control of ruling power, absence of corruption and enforcement of fundamental rights, among other aspects (World Bank, 2020). The report highlights, in particular, the lack of access to fair justice in Venezuela, the high rate of impunity and the high crime rate in the country.

Violating the most basic standards of civil and political rights, the Venezuelan regime maintains a constant policy of systematic harassment and persecution of dissidents at all levels, including political persecution of NGOs and civil society personnel, the main political dissidents. Reports by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch demonstrate that Venezuela is experiencing an unprecedented human rights crisis (Amnesty International, 2019b; Human Rights Watch, 2021). These organisations point out the existence of extrajudicial executions, arbitrary detentions and excessive use of force by state security organisms, as part of their policy of repression to silence dissidence. In its World Report 2021, Human Rights Watch reports on the extremely serious and complex humanitarian

crisis facing the country, and highlights clear evidence of the migratory crisis caused by the mass exodus of Venezuelans due to the lack of medicines, food and basic services, as well as the brutal repression in the country (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

In this authoritarian context of an institutional crisis, rampant impunity, and no accountability, government officials have largely engaged in unpunished corruption. A group of NGOs and media organizations in Venezuela, led by Transparencia Venezuela, developed a digital platform called "*El Corruptómetro*", which has studied and classified information on more than 230 cases of presumed multilevel corruption in the country over the last two decades. According to their evidence, at least 50% of the cases are known to involve more than 52 billion US dollars, around eight times the amount of the country's international reserves in January 2020 (Transparencia Venezuela, 2021).

The alleged misappropriation of public funds, the absence of government control and accountability mechanisms, the consequent failures in fiscal and monetary management, and the attack on the private sector are some of the causes that have led the country to an unprecedented economic crisis with alarming hyperinflation (IMF, 2021). According to official data (incomplete and disproportionate) analysed by the Andrés Bello Catholic University (UCAB) Institute for Economic and Social Research, it is projected that Venezuela will have suffered a 70% economic contraction (in GDP) between 2014 and 2021 (Sequín et al., 2020). According to interviews, life in Venezuela is becoming more expensive every day, making daily work life highly difficult. "*[Printing a report in Venezuela] is too expensive, even at international prices (...) being able to pay is very expensive, and it is not worth it because the quality of the product is very low, as with all goods and services, but they are not goods that are expensive and of quality, but it is what is there and you have to deal with it*" (Interview 20, Nov 2020).

In terms of economic, social and cultural rights, reports published by NGOs, such as Provea and Acción Solidaria, all concur that access to food, medicines, health care, drinking water, and residential gas and electricity in Venezuela is precarious. The country has an officially-decreed minimum wage equivalent to less than one US dollar a month. According to several statistical analyses, it is estimated that 30% of the population suffers from food insecurity, and the poverty rate has surpassed 70% (Cartaya et al., 2020; FIDH & Provea, 2020). Moreover, several studies have shown that the Venezuelan population does not have access to health care services. The lack of health care and medical supplies has been a major source of concern during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Other reports estimate that more than 80% of the population has poor access to drinking water, and more than 70% of the population has recurrent interruptions in electricity services (Cartaya et al., 2020).

The deep human rights crisis and the constant deterioration of political institutions have motivated the population to engage in mass protests, particularly in 2014 and 2017. Both sustained episodes of demonstrations were crushed with brutal repression (OHCHR, 2017).

These unacceptable difficult living conditions and the humanitarian emergency have forced millions of Venezuelans to migrate in search of better living conditions and vital services in other countries, especially neighboring countries, a situation that affects the real enjoyment of human rights. The Human Rights Center at the Andrés Bello Catholic University (CDH-UCAB) has systematized and visibilized the number of cases and displaced persons and refugees, estimating that more than 5.5 million Venezuelans are in this precarious situation (CDH-UCAB, 2021).

Poverty and economic despair have also forced many Venezuelans into slavery and sexual exploitation. Particuarly along the Venezuelan border, modern slavery has become a widespread practice due to the state's fragility and the complex humanitarian emergency that has created conditions of extreme vulnerability (CDH-UCAB, 2020).

ISources stated that "*the issue of the complex humanitarian emergency that encompasses all aspects of the lack of institutions, the co-optation of institutions, and the lack of effective public policies that guarantee rights is a challenge. A diversity of factors converge to partly generate the difficulties and obstacles to carrying out the work, but which are also the same factors that have motivated us to continue doing the work of documentation, denunciation and, above all, demanding the fulfillment of the State's obligations and the recovery of democracy*" (Interview 8, oct 2020).

Taking into consideration these related general aspects, organizations such as the United Nations Human Rights Council, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights have published several reports that reflect the alarming systematic violations of human rights in Venezuela (IACHR, 2020). As an example of this, the Human Rights Council established a fact-finding mission in Venezuela "*to investigate extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearances, arbitrary detentions and torture and other cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment since 2014 with a view to ensuring full accountability for perpetrators and justice for victims*" (OHCHR, 2019). In September 2020, this mission determined, among other things, that "violations of *human rights law have been committed, along with crimes under national and international criminal law*" (UNHRC, 2020).

International reports have also shown that another of Venezuela's institutional weaknesses is manifested in the emergence and strengthening of irregular violent armed paramilitary groups (*colectivos* in Spanish). as mentioned above (InSight Crime, 2018). It is presumed

that some of these irregular groups have had, and continue to have, the government's permission to operate in exchange for political support (OHCHR, 2020). There are also irregular groups whose levels of violence have worsened in recent times, and many of them have become organized crime groups with strong arsenals and effective illegal control of territory, a worrying issue that government security forces have sometimes decided not to confront (OVV, 2020).

The government created joint military and police operations that have failed to control the violence and the armed groups. Due to these failures, the government subsequently created highly violent Special Action Forces (FAES, for its initials in Spanish) which, like the aforementioned joint military-police operations, have become excessively violent, and have been openly criticized for their alleged excessive use of force, abuse of authority and commission of crimes (UNHRC, 2020). Reports on these special forces led the OHCHR to demand their immediate disbandment, which to date has not been complied with (OHCHR, 2019).

As can be seen in this paper, the unprecedented and complex humanitarian emergency, with clear indications of serious human rights violations in the country, has generated the need for human rights advocacy with real influence and impact in order to be able to present and implement viable proposals to remedy the current deplorable situation and benefit the injured victims.

III. How Human Rights Organisations Survive - Lessons From Venezuela

In this section, we present our findings about how HROs have developed resilience mechanisms and carried out their work under authoritarian conditions. Yet it is important to first highlight the shared understanding of the constantly worsening conditions in terms of human rights protection in Venezuela. 92.3% of the organisations that participated in our survey responded that protecting human rights has become more difficult over the past ten years. This means that even though the government has adopted an unfavourable stance and rhetoric towards dissidents and has treated independent HROs as "*enemies*" since its early days, there has been a clear decline in democratic spaces in Venezuela during the past ten years, as stated by our survey participants. In fact, while none HRO and CSOs in the survey considered Venezuela a demcratic system, 94.9% sustained that the country is an authoritarian regime.

We asked participants if they have had to make adjustments to adapt to this political scenario, to which 97.4% responded "*yes*". Those adjustments predominantly occurred in the areas of security (74.4% of cases), finance and funding (53.8% of cases), human capital and strategy formation (48.7% of cases), and communications and international advocacy work (46.2% of cases). Interestingly, 92.3% of participants responded that in spite of these difficulties, it is still possible to carry out human rights work in Venezuela. Moreover, 61.4% stated that they have already found alternative ways to operate under non-democratic circumstances, and 35.9% stated that they are in the process of doing so. Which mechanisms are HROs using and what lessons can other societies learn from the Venezuelan case?

Based on the novel data gathered through our survey and semi-structured interviews, we have identified three main strategies deployed by HROs: 1) transfer of knowledge about prior experiences in human rights activism, what we call "*institutional legacy*"; 2) creation of "*resilience networks*"; and 3) the cultivation of international linkages to visibilize and denounce human rights abuses committed in the country.

A. Institutional Legacy and Organisational Capacities– How The Democratic Past Helps Navigate The Authoritarian Present

The origins of Venezuela's contemporary human rights movements dates back to the 1960s, as we mentioned earlier. During the democratic period, organisations could gather significant information about how the state works, how to leverage state officials, how to organise, how to connect with marginalised and affected communities, how to assist victims of human rights abuses, among many others (Bolívar & Cubas, 2009).

In this report we argue that these practices and experiences, what we call "*institutional legacy*", have helped HROs to work under non-democratic circumstances. As studied by comparative politics scholars, previous events and collective experiences can influence posterior outcomes. From the literature on authoritarian successor parties, for example, we now know that former authoritarian parties and political leaders can "*inherit*" certain capacities from their past that can be useful *after* a transition to democracy. Those capacities can include material resources, informal networks, organisational strength, territorial knowledge or past achievements (Grzymala-Busse, 2002; LeBas, 2011; Loxton & Mainwaring, 2018; Riedl, 2014).

We apply this argument in the opposite direction and argue that non-partisan actors, such as HROs, can use knowledge and experiences accumulated during prior periods of democracy to survive and work in authoritarian contexts. While today's "*opportunity structures*" for carrying out effective human rights work in Venezuela have shrunk, we find that "*the institutional legacy and organisational capacities*" inherited from the democratic period has served different purposes, including the transfer of knowledge across generations of activists and the development of organisational and reputational capacities.

Regarding the transfer of knowledge several participants sustained that the interaction between different generations of human rights defenders is crucial because it has allowed younger generations, who have grown up in a non-democratic environment, to learn about previous practices for dealing with state abuses. For example, interviewee 25 expressed that:

> "*I consider this exchange among generations to be fundamental. The truth is that I would not know anything about human rights work without the exchange with crucial figures of the previous HRM. Let me give you an example, just last night I was on a phone call with a prominent defender and we were talking about the Shipwreck of Güiria. We were exchanging opinions on this matter and I was receiving valuable advice. The same thing happens with people who have been involved in international advocacy activities for a long time. I believe that there is a*

very important connection between the new generation and the older generation. Moreover, I believe that the older generation of defenders have directly or indirectly tried to promote a culture of human rights among the new generation. I would say the new defenders are the fruit of the sowing that these people made or have been doing for the past 30-40 years. I think we have gone through an evolutionary process where those of us who have recently joined are part of that process, and although we do not know what is coming in the future, we hope we can be there to assist the Venezuelan society."

Furthermore, this participant also added that being trained by previous human rights defenders has had important practical implications for contemporary human rights work, in spite of the contextual differences:

"*there is accumulated knowledge, for example, about how to respond or confront state authorities in the face of abuses or human rights violations. There is a "baggage" acquired from the defenders that has been transmitted to those of us who are younger. Of course there are some contextual variations. For example, those who defended the case of the "massacre of the amparo", although they obviously fought against the arbitrariness of the national authorities, they had a democratic space where they could denounce state abuses. Today it seems that these spaces are reduced and that the possibilities of retaliation for activism are greater. Even if we add today's adverse economic context, we are still talking about the same thing: protecting people and fighting against arbitrariness and opacity in terms of information.*"

In one interview, a key human rights defender highlighted that "there is prior learning in the sense that in the 80s and 90s the human rights movement was still small, it did not have much experience with documenting and reporting human rights violations. In this area, Provea, for example, did groundbreaking work. It was the first organisation to write a report on the human rights situation in the country. That made a big difference and had a great impact because no one had done it before. This interviewee also emphasised that while other organisations during the past century were facing dictatorial regimes, the HRM in Venezuela could develop organisational capacities that helped challenge the state after the political turn in the late 90s:

"*We also had some exposure to organisations from other parts of the continent with very different realities. [Many underwent] dictatorial processes, such as the Human Rights Organisations in the Southern Cone, others came from internal armed conflicts of greater or lesser intensity such as Central America or Colombia. We learned [from their experiences]. It was a movement during*

those years that was very permeable and those lessons learned from the international experience of other countries were incorporated into the work of the organisations in Venezuela. So when Chavez came to power, there was a culture, an organisational culture of human rights in the country."

Further interviewees across organisations also highlighted the importance of particular human rights activists whose knowledge and vision of human rights work had a significant impact on how the movement evolved, even until today. Interviewee 22, for example, underlined the pioneering contributions of one of Venezuela's most important human rights defenders, Ligia Bolívar, to the HRM. He emphasised that Bolívar's knowledge about the international system of human rights and her holistic approach to human rights work, that is, the understanding that civil and political rights are as important as socio-economic and cultural rights, had long-lasting effects on Venezuela's HRM:

"*Provea defined itself as an organisation that was going to monitor different rights (civil and political, social, cultural), but with an emphasis on social rights. When Provea was founded in 1988, one of the fundamental slogans for almost 10 years was "social rights are also human rights". Even though our constitution guaranteed some social rights there was little work on this issue. So there was a contribution from Provea, not only to enhance social rights and the protection of those whose social social rights case were violated, but also Provea took on the task of coordinating with others who also had the same concern in different Latin American countries and began to work together with other organisations in promoting social rights as human rights."*

These accounts show how previous norms, values, knowledge, but also organisational capacities were inherited by new generations of human rights defenders thereby influencing and facilitating their work as of today. Most interviewees consistently explained how distinguished activists and lawyers were essential in educating future generations of human rights defenders and how the attempts in creating national networks to promote human rights also helped create a culture of cooperation. Based on this evidence, we argue that HROs can inherit valuable information, tools and skills for human rights work, networks and access to international organisations, which can help them survive and operate in non-democratic contexts. This, in turn, this leads us to believe that in contexts of autocratization, societies that have had prior democratic experiences and have had the opportunity to build -even a small- HRM will be better equipped to defend human rights in non-democratic systems than those who have not.

B. "Resilience Networks" - A Key Tool for Survival

One crucial strategy HROs and CSOs have found to survive and operate under past and current authoritarian circumstances in Venezuela is through the creation of what we call "*resilience networks*".[7] We use the concept "*resilience*" because it helps illustrate the dynamics within the collective spaces of action we seek to understand. Through the lense of different discplines, including political science, psychology, criminology, social work or geography, scholars have looked into how resilience works (Bourbeau, 2016). While there is no all-encompassing definition, we draw on recent scholarships that understands resilience as "*the process of patterned adjustments adopted by a society or an individual in the face of endogenous or exogenous shocks*" (Bourbeau, 2016, p. 28). An 'exogenous shock' could be a diffcult -and often ongoing- current adversity to which actors respond in varying ways. Scholars point out, societies can respond with resilience differently, that is, the mechanisms or strategies developed in one context may or may not work in others (Humbert & Joseph, 2019). Looking at resilience as a dynamic process, during which actors do not just adapt to live under the existing conditions, but respond in such ways that will allow them to influence and change the status quo, is particularly helpful. Bouchard (2013), for example, argues that societies can cope with adversities in different ways. They can either i) successfully oppose and resist to external shocks in order to return to the former state; ii) adapt to the new enviroment by relying on adjustment, negotiation, and compromise and iii) creatively respond to adversity through innovation, which will help them thrive in challenging contexts (Bouchard, 2013).

Resilience can occur through networks. The idea of creating and using networks as a means to collaborate, learn or grow, of course, is not new. Scholarship on social movements and organisational behaviour has already shown how national and international networks have been increasingly used by non-state actors to advance their goals (Powell, 1990; Tarrow, 2011). Networks are useful because they represent "*voluntary, reciprocal and horizontal patterns of communication and exchange*" (Keck & Sikkink, 1998, p. 91). What is more, networks facilitate a fluid and flexible way of organising, in which citizens with certain needs, for example, access to valuable information, can come together and satisfy those needs. In contrast to other, more hierarchical ways of organising, networks allow multiple independent organisations with various backgrounds and expertise to join certain causes at different points in time. Because they do not necessarily

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[7] We do not assume that using networks as a means for coordinated behaviour on a series of issues (e.g. drafting of joint reports, collective awareness campaigns, advocacy work) implies that HROs and/or CSOs will always follow the same criteria in their day-to-day actions. Working together might in fact be difficult given different varying approaches or even personal styles. However, what we found is that in spite of these challenges, organisations value and use networks to survive and carry out their work in non-democratic environments.

impose rigid or bureaucratic rules on their members, but rather prioritise flexible open-ended communication between actors who sympathise with related causes, the barriers to entering and interacting in networks are lower than other organizational structures. In addition, this flexibility allows networks to respond and adapt quickly to changing structural circumstances (Powell, 1990).

CSOs create networks when they share certain values, norms or beliefs, and want to promote them together, either nationally or internationally. They also create them to exchange reliable information, prepare campaigns to advocate for change in different areas, link like-minded organisations to enable further networks in issue areas and create opportunities for trust and community-building (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Powell, 1990). Certainly, any kind of repeated human interaction, including those in networks, can cause conflict, disagreements, and free-rider problems, among other issues. We do not neglect these 'negative' aspects or byproducts of networks, but choose to focus on the 'positive' elements, meaning those that have significant added value for societal resilience in Venezuela.

As in other parts of the world, CSOs and HROs in Venezuela had already used "*networks*" as a means to advance their goals before the rise of Chavismo to power. Yet the purpose and intended impact of the work being conducted through networks completely differ from today's rational and outcomes. Before 1998, organisations relied on networks mainly to share information, experiences and knowledge. They then employed that know-how to change state behaviour. This was possible because, in spite of its shortcomings, Venezuela had a democratic system between 1958 and 1990s. In this sense, because Venezuela had relatively "*open opportunity structures*", HROs that had been growing during this period, had access to officials, political leaders and state bureaucracy and could influence states' course of action regarding the protection of human rights. However, during the past two decades those opportunity structures have been in continuous decline, and as a consequence HROs no longer have the access or ability to influence state behaviour regarding human rights norms.

It is in this context that creating resilience networks has emerged as a crucial and creative mechanism to respond to growing adversity. Through resilient networks, HROs and CSOs have been able to thrive and carry out human rights work in spite of the challenging context in which they operate. In fact, 69.2% of our survey participants stated that cooperating with other organisations has been a key strategy that has allowed them to adjust to the hostile environment in which they are operating. When asked why they have increasingly relied on networks during recent years, 66.7% of our survey participants responded that it increased the efficiency of their activities and human rights work.

Developing Resilience in Authoritarian Contexts
Lessons From Venezuela in Comparative Perspective

Moreover, 15.4% stated that coordinating and cooperating through networks offers extra layers of security, and 10.3% stated that networks create spaces for interaction and learning. 5.1% responded that networks helped to visibilize the work of smaller organisations, while only 2.6% believed that it increased the capacity to access funds.

In our interviews with human rights defenders and members of independent CSOs, we could identify further ways in which collaborating through "*resilience networks*" has helped the HRM to survive and thrive in non-democratic Venezuela. Participants mentioned that networks were a mechanism to transfer knowledge, disseminate information, and transform ideas into action quickly, and have created incentives for mutual learning.

One experienced human rights defender explained how the idea of creating resilience networks came about: "*We sat down and we thought about building a space for the human rights movement but expanded space. What does that mean? The classic historical Human Rights Organisations were no longer useful. We needed to open the space to organisations that wanted to work on human rights and had no one to teach them. Here in Venezuela there was never a human rights school other than the diplomas given by the Andrés Bello Catholic University, but those were small efforts. Other support networks no longer existed*" (Interview 9, October 2020). This interviewee further narrated how the network of human rights defenders came to exist:

"*We travelled to the states [several of us]. We did workshops and looked for a psychologist and we set up a kind of very short training program and we also recorded videos [of important defenders] and took them to the states. I remember that we visited 12 states. What was the idea of that? To summon them to a great meeting. And that was the first meeting of defenders that we held in 2015, we were 52 organisations [...] We created the space for a dialogue and we had the idea of creating networks. There are two international organisations with which we work a lot, one is ICNL, which is an organisation that works on freedom of association. We studied other social movements and concluded that we had not taken advantage of them. We decided that we needed these network movements, because those movements were precisely emerging in authoritarian and non-democratic spaces. That is when we suggested to create networks to all these defenders*" (Interview 9, October 2020).

Resilience networks in Venezuela have also strengthened a "*community spirit*" and shared purpose, which appear to be particularly important in a context of constant democratic decay. They have allowed their members to build trust and quality relationships, as well as to maintain oases of deliberation and participation in a non-democratic context. Interviewee 18, for instance, stated that networks facilitate "*collective intelligence*":

"*I believe that always in contexts like this (not only authoritarian), where great damage to the population occurs and where we are all intervened by an emotional situation, what can make our thinking more balanced is precisely seeing the different situations from different points of view. And that is precisely what I call collective intelligence: being able to address problems from different perspectives, understanding that they are not competing with each other but nurturing each other, to achieve the appropriate response to a context as complex as the one we have. Networking is about the possibility of nurturing the public space with different visions and giving response to the challenges we have from that collective intelligence*" (Interview 18, Dic 2020).

Networks have been particularly useful for quickly and efficiently sharing reliable information. Activists described how networks create "*the possibility of disseminating information beyond what a single organisation can do*" (Interview 20, Nov 2020), and they "*are very important because first [they] give you an absolute and integral vision of what is happening in Venezuela in terms of human rights and the humanitarian crisis. [It is] not the same as finding out about it from the press*" (Interview 1, Nov 2020). Given that HROs are spread across the country and there is both censorship and self-censorship in Venezuela, organisations have been able to count on one another to share first-hand accounts on what they are witnessing.

We have found that resilience networks in Venezuela have also represented a valuable opportunity to share emotions and experiences, including grief, fear and uncertainty. Because networks are not types of organisations in which there is an explicit quid-pro-quo expectation by their members, they have created the opportunity to create strong relational bonds, in a context where division and polarization is being fomented by political actors. Through these networks, younger human rights activists have been able to learn from their experienced peers, and the latter have been able to transmit their knowledge and skills in a more flexible and horizontal environment. In this regard, several activists stated that networks allow members to share their experiences during times of oppression in order to improve their mental health:

"*The accompaniment of other members who work in the same conditions as you is a great strength that gives you the power to share your experience with others who also work in your same area. Working in a non-governmental organisation in a dictatorial context like the one we live in makes you self-censor. I try maybe, not even with my closest circle, not even with my parents I try to mention my work. So when you are part of a human rights network you have monthly meetings and it is like a relief to share what has happened to you. It allows you to drain. It helps with your*

mental health because you are sharing with others who have the same experience as you and who are working in the same context as you" (Interview 2, october 2020).

One of the key defenders in promoting the idea of working through networks highlighted that "40% of the organisations of the human rights movement (or even a little more) are what we call "*emerging*" [organisations]. They were born in 2013, they were born in the context of protests. Now you see those organisations with a very stiff learning curve, because they learned in a space where we exchange, where there is knowledge exchanged, there is learning. That's what we founded the network for" (Interview 9, October 2020). Another interviewee gave another vivid account of the positive impact networks have on their learning and daily work: "You pick up the phone and ask your friends from [organisation] what do you think about [x]. Or you ask your friends at [organisation] how do I put this together. We can't be self-sufficient on all topics [...] without a doubt, knowledge transfer is an important buffer so that organisations don't fall down (Interview 25, Dec 2020).

These experiences underline the real impact that networks have had in connecting activists in a non-democrtic context. Human rights defenders across the country have been able to interact through these networks in spite of regional differences and different organisational capacities and thematic specialities, thereby counterbalancing organisational and economic disparities. And they have used their diversity to share experiences and information, thereby enabling stronger activism and collective resilience.

Another commonly raised benefit was safety and security. As Interviewee 13 put it: "*acting clandestinely, in the shade without any exposure, does not protect you. We always say that in most cases, exposure is protection*" (Interview 13, January 2021). When activists and human rights defenders work through networks they are more efficient in raising the costs of repression in several ways. First, they can share information very quickly and can respond collectively within a short amount of time. Second, they can jointly denounce any irregularities, violent state behaviour or arbitrary detentions, which increases internal efficiency. These speedy and collective responses can, even under authoritarian conditions, have an impact on state behaviour. For example, arbitrarily detained people have been released after such collective "*rapid responses*". Interviewee 2 explained that networks "*make [them] strong in a hostile and repressive environment, it is like a kind of shield. You mess with one and you're messing with everyone.*" Thus, collaborating increases the capacity to visibilize abuses and act more efficiently.

C. International Linkages - How Foreign Actors Contribute to Domestic Resilience

When non-democratic governments gradually close domestic spaces for protest and participation, that is, they reduce the domestic opportunity structures, CSOs can take their demands to the international sphere in order to be heard and enact change at home. This strategy is usually pursued by Human Rights Organisations in societies in which authoritarianism is more advanced and the probabilities of changing state behaviour are marginal. Scholars of social movements and international relations use different terms to describe the interactive space between domestic and international opportunity structures that CSOs have been using to advance their agendas. Some have called them "*multilayered*", "*supranational*", "*multilevel*" or "*transnational*" opportunity structures (Khagram et al., 2002).

Keck and Sikkink (1998) have called one result of that dynamic interaction between these two arenas the "*boomerang effect*". When governments close domestic opportunity structures through violent or non-violent repression, CSOs use the open international arena to seek support in achieving their goals, including liberalization and regimen openness on the domestic level. HROs can directly interact with international allies, such as IGOs, partner organisations, or foreign states and invite them to pressure unresponsive governments through international campaigns or diplomatic means, among other efforts. Closing domestic structures today will thus not translate into an immediate demobilization or dismantling of CSOs, given that they can turn to other spheres which can echo their demands (Keck & Sikkink, 1998).

Furthermore, like domestic networks, international linkages matter in many other ways. Scholarship highlights, for example, the emergence of 'transnational advocacy networks', meaning organised spaces of communication among like-minded activists that fight for (shared) causes, ideas, norms and policy change. These networks may consist of international NGOs, advocacy groups, foundations, media, and churches, etc. Their participants can learn from one another; get access to donors and/or relevant policymaking contacts; share values, norms and beliefs; receive information about domestic and international strategy-formation; and advance their missions (Keck & Sikkink, 1998).

HROs in Venezuela have had to cultivate stronger international linkages to IGOs, international institutions, universities, and think tanks, among many other entities, in order to denounce the increasing violations of human rights. Our data shows that as of February 2021, 97.4% of the organisations who participated in the survey worked with international actors. More interestingly, while 31.6% of those HROs had developed their international linkages before 2013, 39.5% began to establish those relationships after 2013, and 18.4%

Developing Resilience in Authoritarian Contexts
Lessons From Venezuela in Comparative Perspective

since 2018. This means that 57.9% of the organisations saw the need to create international alliances *after* democracy was eroded in Venezuela.

The reasons given by survey participants as to why HROs develop these linkages and engage in international advocacy are consistent: they pursue this mechanism to i) visibilize human rights abuses and defend human rights in the universal human rights system; ii) exchange experiences with and learn from international or regional activists; and iii) strengthen the protection and safety of HRM members and victims.

Our interviews show that HROs go onto the international arena, as expected, once domestic legal systems stop responding to the population's demands by closing democratic spaces and violating people's rights. Many interviewees raised the need for a boomerang effect given the context of continuous democratic erosion. Activists across organisations highlighted how their organisations had to seek international support as the domestic system was closing the spaces for participation. "*The inoperability of the Venezuelan justice system, meaning the closing of democratic spaces and spaces for national conflict resolution, the lack of opportunities to present petitions to the national jurisdiction and have them answered and our rights protected pushed us to use the international system. Given that that is not possible, we access the international jurisdiction and human rights system. So long as we cannot solve problems here, we will access the international sphere, the international protection systems, the proliferation of UN special procedures, individual petitions or precautionary protection from the Inter-American System of Human Rights*" (Interview 25, December 2020). Human rights defenders specified that they "*went to the international system because we needed support in pressuring the state. [Going to the international sphere] helps you triangulate. You have a strong actor, and a strong legal framework, that is, international law, and you make the State sit down to at least present figures*" (Interview 9, October 2020). Another key human rights defender also stressed that "*international linkages are not just important, but essential. What our international peers have done for us in terms of advocacy and support must be recognized*" (Interview 23, November 2020).

Across HROs, activists also reported their concern about the lack of information in foreign countries about the Venezuelan situation. Most believed that travelling abroad, attending conferences or international events, including fora at the United Nations, the OAS or European Union, was necessary in order to explain the systematic violations that had been occurring in Venezuela. "*Through the international connections that we have established with international organisations we create networks through which we disseminate information on what is occurring in Venezuela. This helps visibilize the situation. But this also serves to act as a counterweight to the repressive system [...] People think this might*

be useless, that this only serves to get a statement or report out, but at the end of the day it does work because those who exercise power care about what international actors think. [Our work] does make them uncomfortable and generates high costs" (Interview 13, January 2021).

Other activists underscored the importance of cultivating international linkages, particularly during the last couple of years when the UN Human Rights Office in Caracas as well as the FFM were established: "We had fundamental allies in the advocacy work for the creation of the mandate of the OACNUDH office in Venezuela before Michelle Bachelet took office. There was important and deliberate, planned, structured advocacy work for the renewal of the mandate and the creation of the FFM. It was a very intense job that started many months in advance. Our peers in Geneva, for example, who understand what is going on on the ground, they have been very generous people. They are human rights defenders who understand the issues, who also support our actions when we build them together" (Interview 23, November 2020).

Creating and working on and through international networks has had direct and positive effects on the HROs as well as many victims of human rights abuses. One human rights defender clearly outlined how the movement's intense, persistent and committed work in international arenas has helped it achieve important milestones in its quest for justice: "Even though we are a young movement, we are a human rights movement that has received important contributions and achieved the most significant results from the international community. The most important contributions have not been in international cooperation, or financing. We continue to be a country that receives little funding for human rights, despite the crisis. But we have received important support in terms of international advocacy. And that has helped Nicaragua a lot, fortunately. Venezuela took the human rights movement to the OHCHR office, it put into motion the special mechanisms of the IACHR, the MESEVE, and all the mechanisms that the Commission had available. Additionally, we now have the FFM, which is functioning for the next two years under a new mandate from the Human Rights Council. And although the world does not fully know this, and it's good to know it is that way, a significant part of this advocacy has been done by human rights defenders" (Interview 11, November 2020).

Others discussed minor, but still relevant, direct results from working through networks domestically and internationally: "After all the different national and international advocacy, complaints and pronouncements, we have seen how this work has had an effect. The state has moderated the use of force, it already tries not to directly attack the protesters. I do not mean that it has stopped attacking them, but it has moderated that use of force, so that's part of the job" (Interview 7, Oct 2020). This implies that, even in non-

democratic contexts such as Venezuela's, there is room to influence state behaviour in terms of repression and persecution. Though the country remains non-democratic, the HRM, with the support of international non-partisan actors, has at times succeeded in raising the costs of repression.

Beyond these concrete and relevant contributions, engaging with actors in the international community has also facilitated the sharing of reliable information about what is happening in Venezuela. Because political actors have relied on intensive polarization, misinformation and lobbying around the world to deny the evidence presented by HROs on the human rights situation in the country, activists consistently emphasised that they faced significant barriers when presenting evidence of the deterioration of human rights: "*There is a lot of doubt about what is happening in Venezuela or many do not believe what is going on. So, there we have a line of work that we call "citizen diplomacy" or advocacy in social organisations, but also in governments. We have prioritized organisations that are not convinced about the situation. We call this "international progressivism": organisations that define themselves as left-wing and democratic, but sympathize with the Venezuelan government, or at least if they don't sympathize, they don't believe the dimension of the crisis or the dimension of the human rights violations. So it is a job that is difficult because it involves talking to people who, in principle, sympathize more with the government than with the circumstances of the Venezuelan people. But we have to do it because it is about breaking precisely those barriers and those misunderstandings*" (Interview 22, November 2020).

Creating and engaging in international networks has also had the advantage of making activists feel more protected at times. Though there is never a guarantee that international pressure will force the governing elite to, for example, free arbitrarily detained activists or victims, "*they can immediately knock on doors when protection is needed, those doors would maybe open more slowly if we knocked on them*" (Interview 23, November 2020). This illustrates how international networks are also fast and reliable spaces for domestic activists during non-democratic times.

Finally, we observed how international linkages also had the effect of creating learning opportunities for human rights defenders and activists through exchanges with international or regional activists, as well as through advocacy work with international organisations and institutions. "*I remember when years ago I was participating in international meetings with other peers from various countries where governments were closing spaces. Then when this started to happen here I thought about what I had learned from other societies. So we started talking about developing indicators that could allow us to understand and compare the intentions with which [the government] was planning its*

**Developing Resilience in Authoritarian Contexts
Lessons From Venezuela in Comparative Perspective**

actions here, and to see if those signals could tell us very early on whether [the government] was going towards a serious closure, or eventually towards some actions that implied affecting the rights of civil society. This helped us think about what we could do to prevent [the government] from moving ahead' (Interview 23, November 2020).

IV. Resilience Mechanisms in Latin America- Experiences From Bolivia, Cuba and Nicaragua

As in the Venezuelan case, activists and human rights defenders in Bolivia, Cuba and Nicaragua described patterns of criminalization, stigmatization and persecution by the regimes of Evo Morales, Daniel Ortega and Díaz Canel. Our interview partners explained that, like in Venezuela, these governments have heavily relied on a "*friend and foe rhetoric*" to frame dissidents and activists as the country's "*enemies*". For example, one interviewee in Cuba explained how the government always attempts to create confusion and conspiracy theories about what is going on in Cuba and about what is being said about Cuba in the public sphere: "*We are not the ones who are conspiring, they are. This is a regime that is prepared for the conspiracy, and if there is no conspiracy, they try to create it in some way to be able to bind people to conspiratorial acts to remove them from circulation and try to morally attack them*" (Interview 28). Similarly, another interview partner from Cuba stressed that "*the Cuban regime has risen on suspicion, division and mistrust. There is an organisation called the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution, which is precisely to monitor what the other does*" (Interview 31, February 2021).

One interviewee from Nicaragua gave a similar account regarding the intervention of CSOs and the dismantling of societal resilience through repression. Interviewees consistently stated that these types of authoritarian governments pursue the erosion of trust among the citizenry:

"*In this context, trust has been greatly undermined. The social fabric of our country has been totally disarticulated. It is destroyed because the government has replicated this idea that the blue and white movement [movimiento azul y blanco], the human rights movement … everyone who opposes it, is an enemy of the government. The government has used all the political mechanisms they have at the local level, or even family structures, to monitor people. So on many occasions the attacks have even come from relatives who have reported and used the police force or parastatal force to continue the repression. So there is a lot of mistrust, the dictatorship has used the method of infiltration, for example, and of using information to carry out disqualification campaigns*" (Interview 32, February 2021).

Interviewees also reported intimidation and persecution tactics deployed by state security forces and paramilitary groups as well as the creation of legal tools, such as laws conditioning international funding or regulating cyberspace, to silence and paralyse their work on the ground. This stigmatization of activists has also trascended borders in all cases studied in this report. Members of CSOs and HROs explained that international lobbying

has been a crucial tool to discredit and weaken their work on the ground. For example, one activist from Bolivia explained that "*the narratives disseminated by allies and the government itself, have created a lot of confusion and misunderstanding about what happened in Bolivia*" (Interview 28, January 2021). Likewise, interviewees from Cuba and Nicaragua reported that their governments frame them as right-wing enemies who do not have the people's best interests at heart. What is more, defenders also explained that co-optation and infiltration have been key strategies for dismantling CSOs in their countries.

In a nutshell, governments have i) braodcasted disinformation about CSOs and prominent acvists; ii) co-opted members of NGOs; iii) financed pro-government social movements; and iv) raided headquaters to dismantle their infrastructure.

These examples show that there seems to be a pattern as to how authoritarian governments attack CSOs and HROs. Though the main goal of this report is to inform about the resilience strategies pursued by the HRM in Venezuela, we believe it is useful to understand patterns of resilience under non-democratic rule in comparative perspective. In this regard, we conducted semi-structured interviews with human rights defenders in Bolivia and Cuba to understand how activists perceive governmental practices on the ground and how they have responded in order to continue with their human rights work. It is important to highlight the fact that Cuba, Bolivia and Venezuela of course largely differ in their historical backgrounds, socio-economic development and political systems. For instance, according to Freedom House's Global Freedom Score, Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela are classified as "*not free*", while Bolivia is considered a "*partly free*" country (Freedom House, 2020). Similarly, The Economist's Global Democracy Index 2020 and V-Dem's Liberal Democracy Index classify Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela as authoriarian regimes, and Bolivia as a hybrid regime (The Economist, 2020; V-Dem, 2021). Although all of these measurements vary and face signficant challenges, they help us understand that these societies face different "*opportunity structures*" for human rights work. Have CSOs and HROs in these countries developed mechanisms that are similar to those used by Venezuelan activists and defenders?

When asked which strategies activists and defenders used to operate under Morales's government, one defender explained that networks have been to some extent useful, but underlined the fact that CSOs and HROs have faced a series of obstacles to the creation of networks:

"*Networks are more easily created when they are working on specific actions that do not bother the government. You will find many networks of NGOs in Bolivia that work on different issues that do not represent any inconvenience for the government. There are networks that have already managed to gain a certain*

*independence, such as the UNITAS Network. UNITAS is a network that exists throughout the country. It issued a report on the electoral conflict which monitors the situation of human rights defenders in Bolivia, and it even has a program to support human rights organisation*s" (Interview 28, January 2021).

Similarly, defenders and activists in Nicaragua explained that networks have been useful to get first-hand information, support one another and visibilize their work:

"*There are groups of people working in exile, but also groups of journalists, groups of human rights defenders who are in Nicaragua. They have been working on psychosocial topics and issues related to transitional justice and universal justice. There have been efforts to prepare and strengthen the capacities of human rights defenders who are organized collectively and who work individually, so that they are prepared for these future processes and so that the documentation processes can be carried out with the highest possible quality. And in this process, networking has been important*" (Interview 32, February 2021).

In comparison to Venezuela, however, working through resilience networks in Bolivia and Nicaragua, for example, appears to be more challenging. Inteviewees from Bolivia mentioned that the criminalization and infiltration of CSOs has affected their effectiveness and capacities to work and visibilize human rights abuses during the Morales era. According to our interview partners, many CSOs and HROs have chosen not to work on civil and political rights, and rather to prioritize issues that are "*less sensitive*" for the government, in order to avoid repression or persecution):

"*What have the NGOs done in this context? In most cases they have complied with the law [Law 351]*[8]*, and that is why it has been very difficult to see NGOs in Bolivia assuming a critical position regarding certain human rights violations. Most of the NGOs have dealt with other topics. For example, the issue of violence against women is very important. It is something that even gets out of control, but it is not a very annoying issue for the government. This has never been an issue that could generate problems for the government of Evo Morales, it wouldn't affect them electorally. So a large majority of the NGOs, seeing that violence against women is a real problem and that this issue would not necessarily affect the government, decided to address this type of problem and not get into other issues that were also of grave urgency and that typified serious human rights violations, but which unfortunately were issues that politically affected the government. The issues that could affect the government are related to indigenous peoples, the environment*

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[8] For more details on Law 351, which restricts NGOs' capacity to freely operate, please consult (Amnesty International, 2019a).

and extractivism, and specific violence against opponents, etc." (Interview 27, January 2021).

Along this line, our interview data from Nicaragua shows that the hostile and repressive environment under Ortega's presidency has created a lack of trust among CSOs and the citizenry, thereby increasing the barriers to collaborative work:

"*Networking occurs. It occurs on many occasions based on affinities, that is, based on certain themes. However, at the time the reports are presented to the committees, for example, you see how the groups that are united, for example, environmentalists, who work directly on the defense of human rights or in women's networks … there are different groups who make their own reports. It is very difficult to find a report that is coordinated with all of the organisations that work on, or that have analysed, the human rights situation in the country. And it has to do with the repressive context that we live in*" (Interview 32, February 2021).

Our data on Cuba shows that, as expected, activists are currently facing more difficulties in organising and acting, both collectively and individually, than those in Bolivia, Nicaragua and Venezuela. In our interviews, we found that issues such as poverty, the lack of public services and telecommunications, surveillance, and the endurance of a repressive system, have created significant barriers to societal resilience. One interviewee explained that "*one of the things that is missing in Cuba is historical memory. In other words, if others have resisted more, it is because they have historical memory. What happened here in Cuba? People are poor. The difficult thing is to get people out of poverty. Until people get out of poverty, they will not enter politics. If you have institutions, you participate in politics*" (Interview 29, February 2021). In our conversation, the same interviewee emphasised that "*here we did not have internet, we didn't have cell phones, that was forbidden in Cuba*" (Interview 29, February 2021), which made collective work even more difficult.

Furthermore, the lack of prior experiences regarding collaborative work and human rights defense, in other words, institutional legacy, as well as the absence of material resources to fund resilience, have affected society's capacity to organise and carry out human rights work. Another activist in Cuba gave a vivid account of these serious challenges:

"*I really believe that there is no movement or anything that can be created, neither social nor political, without resources. I started [to do this work] many years ago. I started in 1988 with my Human Rights Committee group. I am really one of the few people left in Cuba from that time. So you really didn't know very well [at the beginning] what you were getting into, because there was no precedent, but you knew you were about to face a monster, which is what the Cuban State is. So you*

have to be quite idealistic for this. But in what way can you achieve things? With the idealism that moves you to that. In addition, also a little to protect yourself, you have to disseminate everything quickly. If you don't, if you shut up, that's the worst that can happen, because this type of system lives off the image it has to give to the outside, which is extremely hypocritical. And logically you have to have finances. Somehow you have to look for finances because if not, how do you live?" (Interview 30, February 2021).

Another interview partner gave a historical account of all the challenges faced by CSOs in Cuba, highlighting the lack of institutional legacy, legal barriers and civic culture:

"*There came a time when civil society completely disappeared; that is to say, that network of organisations independent of the State. There are very few of us left. If anything, the Catholic Church remained, some churches, but they were also infiltrated and controlled. Many people were imprisoned for the first two decades, human rights defenders. In the 90s this began to take hold, but beware, we come from a disjointed civil society. So that makes it difficult to create a movement or network of organisations for the defense of human rights. [Then] the legal factor: it is very difficult, because the association law prevents the constitution of an independent organisation. Today there is no truly independent civil society organisation, opposition and defender of human rights that are legally registered. They exist, but they do not have legal status. And we must add the factor of the little civic culture that exists in Cuba. There are very few people prepared for civic life, because communism is based on imposition and the new man*" (Interview 31, February 2021).

In spite of these challenges, however, activists continue to try to find spaces for civil resistance and overt collective action. The Ladies in White (*Damas de Blanco*), the LGTBI community and, more recently, the San Isidro Movement, a group of Cuban artists, academics, and other alternative thinkers, represent some interesting cases in this respect (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Noce, 2021). When we asked our interview partners which mechanisms they use to carry our their work, they highlighted the importance of the internet and the reliance on networks. In particular, the internet has represented an important window of opportunity for Cuban activists and dissidents, as they have been able to record abuses and share them nationally and internationally. Being able to express themselves, even in very small proportions, given the high levels of state control over all aspects of life, has represented a change in their opportunity structures, as evidenced last year during the protests organised by the San Isidro Movement (Amnesty International, 2020; NYT, 2020).

One of our interview partners in Cuba underlined the importance of being able to share information through the internet and through the networks they have been able to craft in spite of the repressive context:

"*One of the problems that the regime is facing is precisely the question of the internet. When something happens against someone, it is immediately disclosed and shared through our network. We draft statements if something very noteworthy happens and send it to many parties. So we communicate and immediately make a statement with that to show what the situation was like. And what does the government do when it sees it is facing a very serious situation? They cut the internet*" (Interview 31, February 2021).

Finally, activists in all three countries highlighted the significance of working with international allies and establishing linkages with actors in the international community. We found that CSOs and HROs in Bolivia, Nicaragua and Cuba also considered this to be an essential tool in order to pressure non-democratic rulers at home. All interviewees stated that working with international partners and attending hearings or conferences are critical tools that allow CSOs to keep their countries on the international agenda so that victims and injustices are not forgotten. However, they also raised important concerns regarding the limited engagement of international actors in their countries and the impact of diaspora communities on the situation at home.

Our interviewees from Cuba and Nicaragua stated that activists and human rights defenders inside and outside their countries are making significant efforts to establish linkages with international partners to visibilize human rights abuses in their respective countries. Interviews with activists in Cuba explained how international solidarity campaigns and efforts by the diaspora communities and other allies have been important in raising voices against human rights violations:

"*People who have been receptive and sensitive to this problem have helped and supported us, even with their personal resources. In recent years, there have been expressions of solidarity with civil society and the community of human rights defenders. For example, there are organisations that are notably of a leftist persuasion; however, on the Cuban issue … let's see, from the left, not from the Sao Pablo Forum, I don't mean that. But they are from the left, but have expressed their solidarity*" (Interview 30, February 2021).

Activists also put particular emphasis on explaning how exiled communities have consciously decided to engage in advocy work abroad to support their counterparts at home:

Developing Resilience in Authoritarian Contexts
Lessons From Venezuela in Comparative Perspective

"*From exile, we have tried to empower those at thome and tried to make visible the serious human rights violations that continue to be committed. We want the human rights situation in Nicaragua to still be on the international agenda … we try to denounce the severe repression towards the defenders who denounce what is going on. They are persecuted and immediately there is a police patrol outside the house. They immediately activate a whole line of repression that affects the freedom and physical integrity of defenders*" (Interview 32, February 2021).

Activists in Bolivia, Cuba and Nicaragua, as in Venezuela, pursue and rely on international mechanisms to denounce abuses and to pressure their governments to put an end to systemic repression. Though defenders across countries realise that authoritarianism will not mmediately end with their advocay work, they consider this to be a crucial aspect in their quest for justice. Along these lines, our interview partner from Nicaragua argued that international monitoring and documentation by the Inter-American Comission on Human Rights of human rights abuses has been key:

"*We use the opportunities to work in networks as much as possible, and also international human rights mechanisms, which have been necessary to expose the seriousness of the situation in Nicaragua. The IACHR arrived in Nicaragua, and installed two mechanisms: the Monitoring Mechanism for Nicaragua (MESENI), which is still in force, although they were expelled, they continue to document and record human rights violations; and the international Group of Independent Experts (GIE). which carried out an investigation into the repression and assassinations from April to May 30, 201*8" (Interview 32, February 2021).

Although international linkages seem vital, defenders from Cuba and Bolivia raised concerns regarding the role of international allies, diaspora communities and international organisations. Interviewees from Bolivia pointed out that regional and international organisations needed to improve their monitoring systems in order to denounce human rights abuses. They argued, for example, that different domestic and international factors slowed down international responses and pressure mechanisms:

"*The government's strategy in Bolivia had been very effective. As a result, the co-optation of organisations, the generalized fear, and the reduction of civic space led to an absence of complaints to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). That absence of complaints allowed for the perception of a false reality and a false perspective of what was happening in the country. And here my view of the role of the IACHR is very critical. The lack of attention to violence against Human Rights Organisations has been a problem*" (Interview 28, January 2021).

Another interviewee from Bolivia similarly argued that Morales's government was successful in slowing down responses from members of the international community:

"*Evo Morales presented this law [Law 351] which drastically changed the operation of NGOs, it practically outlawed them, and the IACHR never responded favorably to a petition in this case, I was personally in charge of making the petition and we never had a hearing or a positive response from the Commission. We had administrative processes in Bolivia, that was the way we were repressed, and we tried to explain this to international organisations without success. At the same time that we were making these complaints and that there were serious violations of the rights of indigenous peoples, the permanent forum of indigenous peoples of the United Nations saw Evo Morales as the leader of indigenous peoples who supported their causes, so it was very difficult to receive international support, the government could also mobilize indigenous leaders who supported it in those forums and who made counter-arguments.*" (Interview 29, January 2021).

Similarly, one defender from Cuba stated that "*sometimes we Cubans miss the solidarity of Latin American governments and Latin American solidarity and others in Europe*" (Interview 31, January 2021). This interviewee also emphasised that while constructive international pressue is lacking, some diaspora and exile communities lose touch with the realities on the Island, thereby affecting the possibilities of resilience and human rights work of Cubans at home:

"*I have an idea, or a phrase that says: if the Soviet republics had had Miami, they would never have come out from under the Russian boot. Because many times the disagreements do not come from within the island or they do not happen in Venezuela, but rather are discussions about what I call right now "bureaucratic exile", which refers to those that, through the NED and USAID, begin to handle the funds that come to Cuba or that go to Venezuela. So these funds, to continue receiving them, they distance you from general interests of the country, and you begin to have the particular interests of the institutions in mind. Some officials residing in Miami or Washington live, travel, and interact at the expense of the work done in Venezuela or at the expense of work done in Cuba. And I think that later this group of people, who may be very well intentioned at first … lose their way in terms of what is truly the national interest*" (Interview 31, January 2021).

In sum, while challenges are different given that repression has varied over time under the governments of Chávez, Maduro, Morales, Ortega, Castro and Díaz-Canel, activists in these countries have developed -with variyng levels of success given restrictions at home- similar strategies to carry out their work. In this comparative section we have shown that

"*resilience networks*" matter and are helpful across the region, and developing international linkages and pursuing a boomerang effect through international advocacy work also appears to be essential. However, as the experiences in Cuba, Nicaragua and Bolivia demonstrate, international allies and exiled communities must do their best to align their interests to favour -and not hinder- human rights work and civil society work in their respective countries.

V. Conclusions and Recommendations

How can non-partisan actors survive and work under authoritarian conditions? Which strategies are most effective in order to carry out human rights work in hostile environments? This report on the human rights movement in Venezuela addresses these questions. Using empirical evidence gathered through a survey and semi-structured interviews with human rights activists across the country, we have found that the most relevant factors and strategies that enable resilience are the "*institutional legacy*" inherited from prior democratic experiences, the creation of "*resilience networks*", and the intensive use of international linkages.

Although societies vary largely in terms of socio-economic development, political stability, resources, and historical and regional realities, among other characteristics, we believe that this case study can provide important lessons for activists in non-democratic countries around the world:

- Autocrats today cannot erode democracy all at once. Precisely because autocratization is a process that can take several years, it seems vital to identify how to best challenge their authoritarian ambitions during changes in "*opportunity structures*". So long as political regimes are in a "*gray zone*" between democracy and autocracy (Carothers, 2002), activists should use the available space to network, strengthen their organisations, secure funding, and denounce and visibilize human rights violations both internally and externally.
- It is crucial to create strong organisational capacities and networks across the country for several purposes, including the sharing of valuable information, the transfer of knowledge, trust-building, and the promotion and increased effectiveness of human rights campaigns. Moreover, although not all autocracies result in state fragility -the collapse of public services and state bureaucracy- it seems critical to maintain close contact with activists across the country. This helps create a sense of community and shared purpose, even more so in contexts of political polarization and/or territorial fragmentation.
- Resilience networks help create "*collective intelligence*" and purposes that can bring groups of activists together during repressive times. Beyond the above-mentioned advantages of working in networks, experiencing a sense of community and mutual support seems vital.
- Developing an "*international profile*" is particularly relevant in today's interconnected and digital world. HROs should use the universal human rights system, and participate and engage in international conferences, fora, and summits, to visibilize their work and denounce human rights abuses at home. The more

interlinked human rights movements are, the more visible theybecome, and the more costly it will be for autocrats to attack or persecute activists in their country of origin. Furthermore, cultivating linkages and being a member of "*transnational advocacy networks*" (Keck & Sikkink, 1998) will facilitate mutual learning, the sharing of reliable information, and access to donors and/or policymakers.

- The advocacy work and collaborations promoted by diaspora communities seem to be very important in denouncing human rights abuses in their home countries. However, not all types of work conducted by these communities appear to be helpful. Our evidence shows that at times diaspora communities lose touch with local realities, which might hinder effective cooperation.

Based on our study, we also want to present a few observations and recommendations for international partners and funders who aim to support HROs in non-democratic systems:

- It is no secret that worldwide organisations must compete for funding. While this represents a reality that will be hard to change at once, it is important that donors fund human rights work that prioritises the provision of assistance to victims of human rights violations and the development of local capacities. Human rights work is about protecting lives and improving citizens' living conditions, and not about funding "*high-impact*" projects or events that can help generate international attention.

- The pandemic has represented yet another excuse for autocrats around the world to further close down democratic spaces and control their citizenry through violent and non-violent repression. While these anxious times have negatively affected activists and human rights defenders, they have also opened up new possibilities for "*digital resilience*". Being in lockdown or isolation has forced CSOs and HROs to move to the digital sphere to conduct their work and engage in local, regional and international collaborations. In this regard, the pandemic has created new spaces for interaction, planning and coordination. Many organisations have even been able to conduct some limited capacity-building workshops, and to attend seminars and conferences online, which they might not have been able to do otherwise, given limited resources. We believe that international partners and funders could support this kind of digital resilience beyond the pandemic, and could provide capacity-building as well as infrastruture to help CSOs and HROs survive and work in non-democratic contexts.

- We also believe it is important to increase comparative and cross-regional work on human rights activism. Current and future generations of scholars, policymakers and activists should be able to access the experiences and lessons learned in different authoritarian contexts. As we know, transitioning to a democratic system

also requires that citizens be informed about what happened during the authoritarian period and that they learn about the enduring effects of the past. Rigorous research can help promote memory, justice and reconciliation.

- Now that democracy is at risk worldwide, governments and international organisations should develop rapid-response strategies to better assist societies under authoritarian rule. Though there is no "*recipe*" that can be applied to all countries given their particularities, it is crucial that international condemnation and monitoring of human rights violations occur as quickly as possible. When international actors fail to denounce abuses and democratic erosion, autocrats can push forward with their goals of constraining rights and accumulating power. Democracy and human rights are worth protecting worldwide and this will require more elaborate and multilateral responses.

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