

Senate Hearing

In February of 2014, after calling for non violent protests against the corrupt and autocratic regime of Nicolás Maduro, I was arrested, sent to a military prison, kept in solitary confinement for almost four years, and sentenced to 14 years of prison after a manipulated trial that concluded I was guilty of inciting violence through subliminal messages during my public speeches. In 2017, I was sent to house arrest until I escaped in April of 2019 to seek refuge at the Spanish Embassy in Caracas, where I stayed until late 2020 when I escaped Venezuela to meet my family that had been in Spain since 2019. My struggle against the regime started way before 2014, I was elected mayor of Chacao in Caracas in 2000, reelected in 2004, and since then I was banned from running for office and became the target of widespread attacks that included two murder attempts. My story is one of many; I have not been alone in this struggle. Hundreds of activists, social leaders, journalists, union leaders, business people, students, military officers, and common citizens have been the targets of the Maduro regime. After being in exile and learning first hand the testimonies of hundreds of democracy defenders, I now know that far from being an isolated case, this is the story of millions of individuals willing to stand up and fight for freedom around the world.

Last November, we launched the World Liberty Congress to gather pro-democracy leaders from more than 40 autocratic countries. The first day, we heard 40 delegations and it was eye opening that for hours we heard the same story repeating itself in different contexts and voices, the stories at the frontlines. It is from that perspective that I speak to you today, from the viewpoint of men and women who are willing to risk their freedom and lives to achieve freedom and democracy.

According to Freedom House, 2023 marked the 17th consecutive year of democratic recession. This rise of autocracy has reached a level where 70% of the world population now live under some type of autocratic regime (According to V.Them). However, this should not be confused with the will of the people; global polling reflects that 80% of the world's population wants to be free and live in a democracy. The recent

and surprising protests in Iran, China, and Georgia to mention just a few, show that despite the efforts of dictators and despots, the will to be free remains consistent. However, it is also true that these movements have become less successful given the capacity of autocracies to repress and contain the transition to democracy through civil protests. Nonviolent pro-democracy movements went from a 60% success rate in transition to democracy in the 1990s to less than 5% today according to a recent study from Harvard University.

Autocracies have aligned their efforts to support each other in a non ideological but very pragmatic alliance to learn and support each other. Russian oligarchs, anxious to prevent democratization in Latin America, routinely send delegations to Havana, Caracas, and Managua to discuss mutual “security.” The most recent visit was that of Nikolai Patrushev, a Russian General, intelligence officer, and orchestrator of war crimes in Ukraine. The topic of discussion was the suppression of “color revolutions.” Disguised as a diplomatic mission, this was a blatant Russian intervention in Latin America with the specific purpose of sharing methods of repression to terrorize and intimidate any possible dissenters. Putin, often considered to be a traditionalist, nationalist, and right-winger, has thrown massive support behind Nicaragua’s Daniel Ortega, who styles himself as a socialist and a hardline left-winger. It’s important to realize that these despots’ “ideologies” are actually a thin facade for transnational corruption and the exportation of human rights violations. Putin will face no domestic backlash for his ideologically incomprehensible support of Ortega; Russian support is not rooted in admiration for Sandinismo in Nicaragua. It is merely a strategy to make the world less safe for those who respect human rights, the rule of law, and democracy.

Democracy is in retreat. Whether we want to accept it or not, there is a global battle being waged against liberal democracy by the forces of autocracy. Dictators recognize that their enemy is not the United States or Great Britain or France; their enemy is the system of democracy itself, because where it exists and thrives, it provides indisputable proof that the corrupt and decrepit ideals of autocracy are hollow and inferior. This is why Cuban communists, Russian nationalists, and Iranian theocrats

have wholeheartedly embraced one another. They are not tied together by ideology or principles. They are united merely by a fear of grassroots popular mobilization which is the principle challenge to their illegitimate rule. They are thus willing to support each other unconditionally, because they recognize that they face an existential threat. If there is one purpose of my visit to this chamber today, it is to convince you, and freedom loving nations everywhere, that the political developments in Caracas or Khartoum or Hong Kong have direct implications for the security of the United States. We, too, face an existential threat.

There can be no delusion that sitting out of this fight is an option. A passive United States which is content to do business with dictators, and which shies away from doing everything possible to embolden and empower freedom fighters is making the world safer for human rights violators and kleptocrats. With or without the participation of the US, this battle is being fought. And those who seek to spread autocracy and undermine democracy are not short of funds or weapons. They have found new ways to protect their interests, exchanging resources, intelligence, military support, and methods of repression regardless of their supposed ideologies. This is why the US must take an active role in leading the creation of a parallel alliance, which is held together by a shared commitment to protect the values which we in this chamber hold dear.

It is true that Washington has done much to support our struggle in Venezuela. The US led the effort to isolate Nicolás Maduro and deny him access to illicit funds, and to empower those who sought to restore dignity and legitimate governance to our country. It nearly resulted in the removal of the mafia which currently sits in Miraflores in Caracas. But, today, that regime sits more firmly in power than it did 5 years ago. Slapping sanctions on human rights violators is logical and necessary, but because of the unwavering transnational support between dictatorships, there must be a comprehensive re-examination of the policy tools available. Most importantly, we must realize that we don't have the luxury of "losing patience," or giving this grotesque regime even a shred of legitimacy on the international stage. To do so not only condemns the people of Venezuela to live in poverty and persecution in perpetuity, but it also makes

the world safer for those who seek to replicate the Venezuelan tragedy, and I can say to you that there is no shortage of these people around the world.

It must also be spoken out loud and plainly; the United Nations has allowed some of the world's most rampant human rights violators to masquerade as statesmen and honest members of the international community. Once again, irrespective of ideology, human rights violators align themselves to present themselves as legitimate governments and vote to protect each other's interests. The resolution to expel the Iranian regime from the U.N. Women's Rights Commission faced stiff resistance. Those who voted against the resolution included: Bolivia, China, Kazakhstan, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Oman, Russia, and Zimbabwe. Journalist Hillel Neuer dubbed this group the "Axis of Shame." Similarly, resolutions to condemn Russia for the invasion of Ukraine face opposition from similar actors, whose governments denominate themselves as everything from "communists" to "right-wing nationalists."

Authoritarianism is a hollow and decrepit ideal. It is incompatible with the human spirit, which innately yearns for freedom. Dictators intensely fear bottom-up popular mobilization, which is why they invest so heavily in suppressing it. By definition, authoritarianism centers itself around the suppression of basic human rights, such as freedom of expression, assembly, thought, and religion. This means that authoritarians will always have enemies, both within and beyond their borders. Dictators must always direct most of their energy, funds, and influence into terrifying and suppressing the will of their people, or their grip on power will slip.

We have spoken of the advantages autocrats have over democrats. This, however, is an inescapable disadvantage of the dictators. They rely on terror, extortion, and the steady flow of funds and weapons to remain in power. Their opponents, however, are motivated by much more powerful, incorruptible ideals. Victims of authoritarianism have had their basic humanity stolen from them. This is why across the world, pro-democracy demonstrators are willing to take to the streets week after week, willing to be shot at, beaten, imprisoned, and tortured. In many places, dictators are

finding that their habit of abusing and humiliating their populations creates a determined, and with the help of free nations, increasingly organized and well funded resistance. Even after 7 months, the people of Iran continue to fill the streets. When we see the images of Iranian women resisting a brutal theocracy, I ask you; what could be a better use of US influence and leadership, than to embolden these people? What is a better demonstration of the American ideals of democracy and liberty than the Iranian people at this moment?

Policy Recommendations:

1. Secure bipartisan support for global democratic assistance
2. Declare democracy support a central foreign policy objective
3. Incorporate the Private Sector
4. Consistency in denying legitimacy to autocrats
5. Support civil resistance and pro democracy movements, move from the 1990s paradigm to the new reality after the invasion of Ukraine. Freedom needs to be fought for.
6. Massive access to free and uncensored internet and affordable smartphones
7. Support for Exiles
8. Visibility and support to political prisoners
9. Support and strengthen international efforts like the ICC to make dictators accountable for their crimes
10. Rethink sanctions and use new legislation like magnitsky
11. Respond effectively to transnational repression
12. Use of FinTech to overcome the obstacles of autocracies to bring financial support

