

RESILIENCE IN TIMES OF REPRESSION

Carlos Patiño Pereda

- *“The basic motive of the resistance was indignation.”* •

Stéphane Hessel

ABSTRACT

From April to July 2017, Venezuela was the stage for ongoing street demonstrations as a result of a resistance movement known as the first Venezuelan popular rebellion of the 21st century. The government defeated this peaceful protest movement through the use of repression and the imposition of a fraudulent National Constituent Assembly. In such a hostile environment, civil society organisations faced, and still face, the challenge of continuing their work to promote and defend human rights without succumbing to individual and collective despair. To do this, the concept of resilience and putting it into practice have been key.

KEYWORDS

Resilience | Democracy | Adversity | Hope | Civil society | Networks

1 • The human rights situation and human rights organisations in Venezuela

The Venezuelan human rights movement is currently facing enormous challenges due to a sort of social anomie where repression and severe restrictions on those who disagree with or criticise the government persist. Shaken by an unprecedented economic and social crisis generated by its own public policies, in 2016, the Nicolás Maduro administration chose to shift from a democracy with limited freedoms to a modern dictatorship,¹ adopting a model similar to the one used by Alberto Fujimori in Peru in the 1990s.

In March 2017, Attorney General of the Republic Luisa Ortega Díaz publicly denounced “violations of the constitutional order and disregard for the state model enshrined in the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, which constitutes a breach of constitutional order”.² This sparked a series of street protests that lasted over 100 days, which Provea³ described as the first Venezuelan popular rebellion of the 21st century and the most important peaceful protest movement in Latin America in recent years.

However, even with the crisis worsening and conflict escalating, the government responded by criminalising protest, adopting the systematic use of force in demonstrations and applying the military jurisdiction to civilians. According to the *Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social* (Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict), between 1 April and 30 July 2017, a total of 6,729 protests were registered in an average of 56 days.⁴ Furthermore, according to data of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights,⁵ 124 people were assassinated during the protests and 1,958 were injured. 5,000 arbitrary arrests were made, of which at least 609 individuals were forced to appear before military tribunals. To this, one must add denunciations of homes being attacked by teargas, searches conducted without warrants, robberies committed by police and military personnel, harassment at work and dismissals for political reasons, as well as attacks by armed civilians acting in coordination with security forces (paramilitary groups).

The popular rebellion ended with the imposition of a fraudulent National Constituent Assembly⁶ as a move to abolish the Constitution promoted by Hugo Chavez in 1999, impose the constituent assembly’s authority over other government offices and criminalise dissent using instruments such as the *Ley Contra el Odio* (Anti-Hate law)⁷ and the *Comisión de la Verdad, la Justicia, la Paz y la Tranquilidad Pública* (Commission of Truth, Justice, Peace and Public Tranquillity).⁸ This did not resolve the issues that sparked the protests; on the contrary, it made them worse.

The 30 August 2017 report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner concluded that grave and systemic violations of human rights had been committed in Venezuela and pointed to “the existence of a policy to repress political dissent and instil fear in the population.”⁹ The shift towards a modern dictatorship has led to a change in focus for certain non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as they gradually incorporate in their

work the defence of democratic freedoms affected by authoritarian decisions. The result of this has been threats against and the criminalisation of the NGOs¹⁰ by the dictatorship's high-ranking authorities and institutions and the public media network.

2 • Defenders in the face of adversity: resilience and human rights

The work of men and women human rights defenders entails confronting situations of adversity – both their own and those of the victims of human rights violations they defend – and resolving them in the best way possible. This is directly related to the concept of resilience – that is, overcoming traumatic events or situations of distress in a positive way.

After the defeat of the popular rebellion, there was a general feeling of frustration and discouragement in the struggle to save democracy and the justiciability of rights in Venezuela. In light of this, organisations such as *Civilis Derechos Humanos*¹¹ (Civilis Human Rights) have highlighted the importance of using resilience as a tool for overcoming adversity and trauma through the strengthening of defensive capacities.

For Civilis Executive Director Jo D' Elia,¹²

Reflection and decision-making on the development of capacities to respond to and overcome potentially highly negative threat patterns enable organisations to continue fulfilling their mission and guarantee the integrity of each of their members and the people they help.

The public nature of these threats increases the potential for harm. D'Elia adds that:

Situations of political oppression create this type of adversity. As they are intentional and planned, the intimidations, violence, cruelty, censorship, social and economic deprivation and closing of civic space, among other things, generate a complex set of threats that create the constant risk that people's human rights will be violated. There is a high probability of this becoming widespread as a consequence of the logic that non-democratic systems use to maintain themselves in power, which exceeds societies' capacities to protect themselves in the absence of the rule of law, independent judicial institutions and other mitigating contextual factors.

Another human rights defender and former executive director of Provea,¹³ Marino Alvarado, believes that the work to defend human rights always involves risk and is full of adversity. "It is a constant struggle against the arbitrariness of power and a struggle to obtain justice in countries that place their bets on impunity", he affirms.

Even though organisations and activists often underestimate their victories and impacts, resilience implies having a greater understanding of the positive effects generated by both individual and collective action. According to Alvarado, “daily life, which is often intense and where what is urgent takes priority over what is important, robs the moments we have for reflecting calmly on successes and errors, triumphs and failures and for analysing the opportunities that exist in the midst of difficulties.” This is why resilience obliges us to reflect with an open and tolerant mind on how far we have come and design the path to follow.

According to research carried out by Civilis, in situations of oppression, efforts to provide international protection would not be enough if, at the time, the population was not engaged in the struggle for liberation and protection and willing to rise again from defeat when up against forces of opposition that are stronger than their own. However, the defeat of the popular rebellion that lasted four months on the street demobilised the Venezuelan population, which now appears to be passive towards the government’s growing arbitrariness and the lack of coherent strategies among an opposition that is now divided and weak.

Hence, the necessity to develop the population’s capacity for resilience. A resilient civil society is needed – one that is actively committed to the defence of human rights, democracy, the rule of law and justice¹⁴ and shows solidarity with this struggle, and acts out of its own convictions and callings until it is able to re-establish safe and favourable conditions for the achievement of free and democratic societies. Thus, in the adversity approach, resilience is a form of protection that consists of preparing oneself to overcome threats and trauma.

Accordingly, Civilis proposes the following strategies of resilience:

- a • Providing people physical protection;
- b • Acting rapidly to respond to arbitrary acts;
- c • People providing mutual protection for one another;
- d • Restoring social memory;
- e • Combined justice by alternating various strategies in and out of court.

And to complement the strategies, it proposes the following tactics:

- f • Defuse intimidation;
- g • Eliminate or avoid opportunities for abuse and violence;
- h • Unblock access to help;
- i • Unmask lies and censorship;
- j • Win allies;
- k • Take original and innovative actions.

Organisations such as Provea, for example, have implemented self-care measures for their human rights defenders as part of their strategies of resilience. These measures include recreational activities held out of town,¹⁵ lunches for the whole staff or by

working group, regular coffee breaks at the office, celebrations of the goals achieved by the organisation, self-help workshops, group and individual therapy accompanied by professionals, bi-annual evaluation and planning meetings held outside the workplace, and the development and discussion of security plans with the entire team. For these discussions, the team uses the manuals for human rights defenders at risk by Front Line Defenders as a guide.¹⁶

3 • Civil society networking

In light of the current situation, civil society organisations in Venezuela have adopted resilient measures, which include coordination, collective action and catharses. Examples range from joint efforts to document and denounce incidents to international protection agencies – such as IACHR hearings,¹⁷ UN UPRs¹⁸ and various commissions and rapporteurs – to public statements condemning human rights violations elaborated, signed and disseminated by dozens of organisations.¹⁹ Similarly, it is worth highlighting the Third Meeting of Men and Women Human Rights Defenders²⁰ held in November 2017. During the event, more than 160 activists from all over the country met in Caracas with the goal of giving visibility to the work of human rights organisations in the current context and to discuss the various challenges they will face in the future. This networking minimises individual vulnerabilities, allows organisations to channel emotions collectively and strengthens the human rights movement as a whole.

Another concrete example is the support networks that have been created, such as the social networks of NGOs focused on the search for, exchange and donation of medicine and medical supplies for the current humanitarian crisis in Venezuela.²¹ This is what the organisation *Acción Solidaria* (Action for Solidarity), for example, has been coordinating.²²

4 • The right to hope

In this context, resilience can be considered a mechanism for fighting despair and overcoming adversity. Philosopher Laín Entraldo²³ defines hope as the expectation that a given future will emerge under certain circumstances, which comes with the belief or confidence that there will be a response to this individual or collective expectation, regardless of whether it is positive or not. Not receiving a response can block hope and turn it into despair.

Marino Alvarado argues and insists that after the defeat of the popular rebellion of April-July 2017, resilience in Venezuela began to analyse the causes of the defeat, identify the lessons learned and highlight what was won. The four objectives the rebellion had outlined were: 1) a humanitarian channel for medical supplies; 2) freedom for political prisoners; 3) elections in adequate conditions; and 4) recognition and respect for the work of the National Assembly and elected deputies. Although these objectives were not

met, other important goals were achieved that will have positive impacts in the years to come. One example is the increase in international pressure from organisations such as the Organization of American States and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights on the Nicolás Maduro dictatorship and its high ranking officials. Therefore, for Marino Alvarado, the resilient message must be honest, yet encouraging: “While the popular rebellion was defeated, it could appeal to the International Criminal Court in relation to the human rights violators.”

A hopeful discourse can free the population in general, and of human rights defenders and the victims in particular, from discouragement. It is important to strengthen the capacity to fight that was demonstrated during the four months of popular rebellion and highlight the lessons learned for future struggles. It should also be recognised that although the government is weak, it did manage to re-establish a certain level of political stability. Even so, it is currently on the offensive, which could mean greater adversity for activists and organisations. This situation obliges us to take measures calmly and in due time, while recognising the progress made.

For D’Elia, the protection approach based on adversity offers other ways to address situations of threat when they do not depend on vulnerability and do not exceed capacities to protect. He says that in particularly hostile situations, it is necessary to have both an international community that is actively assuming its responsibility to protect and a resilient population and civil society capable of challenging the threats by defending human rights, democracy, the rule of law and justice.

According to Civilis, one key and promising strategy is to strengthen the human rights movement by incorporating more people, groups, organisations, communities and networks of volunteers in the activities of advocacy and promotion²⁴ with the goal of reaffirming rights and using them as the basis of legitimate efforts to put an end to the abuses, seek justice and fully restore the rule of law and democracy.

In his work *Time for Outrage*,²⁵ Stéphane Hessel, co-author of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, stated that peaceful insurrection and the will to commit to history are born from indignation: “the yeast that makes the bread rise”. If we resign ourselves to accepting rights violations, we will be overwhelmed by indifference, or, equally as bad, the loss of the ability to feel outrage and the commitment that goes with it. Exasperation is not a good guide either, as it usually leads to violence and violence is not always efficient. Violence tends to be less motivating and unifying than peaceful protest.

In situations of oppression, as in the case of Venezuela, where undemocratic regimes promote despair as a mechanism for domination, where the message the government repeats over and over is “the revolution is here to stay”,²⁶ opposition factions “will not return”²⁷ and what cannot be achieved through votes, “we will do through arms”,²⁸ citizens’ indignation must urgently be challenged into a source of hope and change.

5 • Conclusion

The severe repression in Venezuela during the first half of 2017, which was the Nicolás Maduro government's response to the popular resistance movement, left deep scars on Venezuelan society. The cycle of protests was defeated through grave and systematic violations of human rights and the imposition of a fraudulent National Constituent Assembly.

The goals that the resistance movement set out to achieve were not met. However, a mobilisation process must not be evaluated only on the basis of whether or not it achieved its objectives, but also on the advances in organisation it generated and any unexpected positive results. In this hostile environment, civil society organisations have had to carry out their work to promote and defend human rights, remember their positive outcomes and not succumb to individual and collective despair.

In light of the tendency towards resignation in Venezuelan society in general, and especially to prevent civil society from retreating, the human rights movement has strengthened its coordination and networking. It has done so by assuming its defeats and highlighting its victories, as organisations lend each other support, explore collective strategies and promote the self-care of women and men human rights defenders.

Civil society's strength lies in its collective energy, which affects the use of social resilience as a mechanism for overcoming adversity and enforcing rights in order to put an end to abuses of power. In contexts marked by oppression, as is the case in Venezuela, resilience can be learned and must be actively practiced in order to contribute to the rebuilding of the country's institutions and the attainment of justice and a life with dignity. This enormous challenge calls for unity of action and on Venezuelan women and men who are committed to democracy to join in the efforts.

NOTES

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