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Venezuela

Venezuela’s authoritarian turn and the repression of its Left

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Since Venezuela’s disputed 2024 elections, Nicolás Maduro’s government has escalated its authoritarian turn. More than 2,000 people were detained in the days following the vote, and targeted persecution has widened to include journalists, trade unionists, academics, and human rights defenders. Human rights activist Marta Lía Grajales was disappeared for two days after denouncing the brutal beating of mothers demanding freedom for their imprisoned children. María Alejandra Díaz, a Chavista lawyer and former Constituent Assembly member, was stripped of her license and harassed after calling for transparency in the vote count. These cases illustrate a broader strategy of intimidation and criminalization.

The repression is falling above all on the critical Left. In recent months, official media have accused Edgardo Lander, Emiliano Terán Mantovani, Alexandra Martínez, Francisco Javier Velasco, and Santiago Arconada of forming a supposed “network of foreign interference” disguised as academic and environmental work. Institutions such as the Faculty of Economic and Social Sciences of the Central University of Venezuela, CENDES, the Observatory of Political Ecology, and the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation have also been smeared as part of this alleged conspiracy.

Edgardo Lander — sociologist, retired professor at the Central University of Venezuela, and a leading voice in Latin American debates on democracy, extractivism, and the future of the Left — is himself among those targeted. His critical work on the Orinoco Mining Arc and his insistence on independent thought have placed him in the government’s crosshairs.

In this interview, conducted by Anderson Bean, Lander reflects on the deepening repression in Venezuela, the criminalization of dissent, and the stakes for academic freedom, democracy, and international solidarity. The conversation has been translated and lightly edited for clarity and brevity.

Editor’s note: This interview took place prior to the 3 September illegal U.S. naval attack on a Venezuelan-flagged boat in the Caribbean Sea that killed all 11 people on board. [1] *[Tempest]*

Anderson Bean: Since the disputed 2024 elections, repression against critical voices has intensified, with more than 2,000 people arrested and targeted cases of persecution multiplying. How would you describe the general climate of repression in Venezuela since the elections?

Edgardo Lander: Those elections were, in many ways, a watershed moment in Venezuela’s Bolivarian process. In recent years, what once seemed like hard limits—red lines that couldn’t be crossed—have been crossed again and again.

Until Venezuela’s presidential elections last year, the system was, by and large, trustworthy. Yes, there had been a few isolated cases where fraud was obvious, like gubernatorial races in Bolívar and Barinas, but those didn’t affect results at the national level. Venezuela’s automated electronic voting system, with its multiple safeguards, had made large-scale fraud very difficult.

The process was straightforward: you voted, the machine displayed your choice on a screen, then printed a paper

receipt. You checked that it matched your vote, and deposited it in a ballot box. At the end of the day, the machines produced a report, and with witnesses present, the boxes were opened and compared to the machine tallies. The records were signed off by witnesses to certify that the electronic and paper counts matched. That’s why, up until that moment, Venezuelan elections were, I repeat, fundamentally reliable.

But this time, when the government began to receive the results, it realized it was not just going to lose but lose badly. They may have thought they could afford a narrow defeat and then massage the results in a few states to scrape through with a win. But the margin of defeat was so overwhelming that this was impossible. So they simply threw out the rules of the game.

They claimed the system had been hacked from North Macedonia. Then the head of the National Electoral Council appeared—literally with a napkin in his hand—reading out invented numbers that had nothing to do with the actual vote. Not long afterward, Maduro was declared the winner.

That was a very important red line, because it marked the shift from a government that, yes, manipulated public resources, threatened state workers, repressed and intimidated the opposition, blocked opposition parties from carrying out activities, and so on—but where, on election day itself, people’s votes were at least faithfully recorded by the machines. For the first time, brazenly, they decided to break the rules of the game and remove the very notion of elections from the political or democratic game. That was a step toward a regime that revealed itself as openly authoritarian, disregarding both the Constitution and electoral norms.

Naturally, that sparked massive protests, which the government answered with mass arrests. Many of these arrests were absolutely arbitrary: young people who happened to be standing in front of their houses, or who had just gone out to buy bread, were accused of terrorism and taken away. The government has essentially admitted that it cannot receive majority support, and that if it wants to remain in power, it must do so through repression and instilling fear in the population.

That’s why, after election day, there were two days of major demonstrations. At least 25,000 people took to the streets, and nearly 2,000 were detained amid brutal repression. With that, they managed to spread terror and drive people back into their homes.

Since then, that logic of systematic repression has continued at every level. It has meant the arrest of journalists, the arrest of economists for publishing figures the government didn’t like, the detention of trade unionists, of university professors. After the massive roundup in the days following the election, repression has become more selective, but it is moving steadily toward a total intolerance of dissent.

The government has closed more media outlets and invoked a series of laws in recent months—the “Anti-Hate Law,” the “Anti-Terrorism Law,” and others—aimed at criminalizing any act of opposition, no matter how peaceful, because any such act is immediately branded as terrorism.

Today, we are facing a government that is trying to deny any possibility of dissent finding expression, any space at all where it can exist. That explains the attacks on universities, on journalists, and the systematic campaign against NGOs. Since the government insists on framing everything as a battle between a “revolutionary government” and “imperialist aggression,” NGOs are labeled as foreign-funded instruments, run by the CIA, whose aim is to undermine the government. Most recently, this has included targeting the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation and branding denunciations of the Orinoco Mining Arc as attacks on the state.

A very recent and significant milestone in the authoritarian drift came with the assault on the vigil of the mothers of

political prisoners. These mothers, whose sons are jailed, had gone from one state office to another, until they were told that only the president of the Supreme Court could decide their cases. They went to the court, requested an audience, were denied, and then decided to hold a vigil in the plaza outside. They pitched a tent, joined by human rights activists, and even had children with them. Around ten o’clock that night, the permanent guard outside the court was withdrawn, the lights in the area were shut off, and then some 80 members of pro-government colectivos, some masked, arrived. They beat the mothers, stole their cell phones and ID cards, and drove them out of the plaza in the middle of the night. Many of the mothers had come from the provinces and were left stranded in the city, unable to communicate.

It was truly an outrage, another escalation of authoritarian logic. And when the mothers tried to file complaints with the Attorney General’s Office and the Ombudsman, they were told nothing could be done, since it had been a “private action” by colectivos, not the police—an absurd claim.

This offensive against intellectuals, against the Central University of Venezuela—which has become an important space of thought and dissent—is part of a broader strategy: every single place where voices could exist that differ from the government’s is to be treated as an enemy, as an agent of imperialism, to be persecuted. Those are the new rules of the game.

Anderson Bean: In the past year we’ve seen cases where even people with Chavista backgrounds have been repressed — for example, Marta Lía Grajales, who was forced into an unmarked van and detained after denouncing the violent beating of mothers protesting for their children’s release, an episode you just described, and María Alejandra Díaz, a lawyer and former Constituent Assembly member, who was stripped of her license after demanding transparency in the 2024 elections. What do these cases reveal about the Maduro government’s readiness to target former allies and its own base? Could you also talk a bit more about their situations and why they are significant?

Edgardo Lander: Marta Grajales was, in fact, disappeared for about two and a half days. Her husband and human rights organizations went around to the usual detention centers where people are taken in these circumstances, and in every single one, they were told she wasn’t there. The reaction was so strong—mobilization across Latin American public opinion, academia, networks of social organizations, and even among parts of the Chavista grassroots—that the government, apparently (I can’t say for certain, but this seems likely), was taken aback by the strength of the response and decided to release Marta right away.

That doesn’t mean she is free: she still faces extremely serious charges that could carry up to ten years in prison if her case goes to trial and she is convicted. But what’s already clear is that this is not about repressing the right-wing opposition. Marta is no right-winger—she is a compañera, a long-time Chavista activist. The point is that it no longer matters if someone has a party card, a militant record, or years of identification with the government. Being a Chavista is no longer a protection.

That’s why I highlight one of the key features of the current political moment, captured in a hashtag that has accompanied many government declarations in recent days: “To doubt is to betray.” They repeat it over and over. And that is a sign of weakness, of insecurity, because there are people inside the armed forces, the police, and even the Chavista base who disagree with what is happening. In this context, not only is it forbidden to denounce abuses—it is forbidden even to doubt. Anyone with doubts must keep them silent, because voicing doubt is treated as treason.

This is a new authoritarian model in which not only are autonomous organizations banned, but even unions have been declared obsolete—Maduro has announced he will create a new structure to replace them. He also declared the creation of workplace militias: 450,000 armed people in workplaces across the country, supposedly to resist

imperialism when the Marines arrive. All of this is closing off every possible democratic space, every outlet for free expression. The goal is to generate fear—fear of going out into the street, fear of speaking up, fear among journalists who self-censor—so that in the end what we have is a closed regime with no options at all.

Maduro’s relationship with the Left across the continent has deteriorated enormously. The only governments he still aligns with are Cuba, Nicaragua, and, to some extent, Bolivia, at least until its recent elections. Beyond that, Venezuela is very isolated. Of course, there is still a sector of the Left that clings to the idea that “the enemy is always imperialism—whoever opposes imperialism is my ally, whoever doesn’t is my enemy.” And so, even in this context of serious denunciations, the São Paulo Forum—the umbrella for many of Latin America’s “official” Left parties (not all, but a significant number)—issued a statement that made no mention whatsoever of human rights, or of persecution, or of detentions. They spoke only of the threats that the United States represents for Venezuelan sovereignty—talking about something else entirely.

That is extremely serious. I always insist that the worst thing one can do to the Left, to any anti-capitalist or progressive option in the world today, is to call what exists in Venezuela “socialism” or a “left government.” Because that provokes such rejection that people understandably say: “If that is the left, if that is socialism, then I’ll vote for the right.” That is why I consider the stance of the São Paulo Forum so perverse: it perpetuates the myth that the governments of Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela are revolutionary, progressive, democratic governments. And yet anyone can read the newspapers to see the reality.

In Venezuela’s case, it is even clearer because of the sheer number of migrants who have left the country. Their first-hand stories about what they endured cannot be silenced or denied—there are simply too many voices saying the same thing. Ask them why they had to leave, and the answers pile up: because of this, and this, and this. The testimonies are overwhelming.

Anderson Bean: In this context, you and other prominent academics have been accused in official media of being part of an alleged “network of political interference disguised as academic and environmental work.” Could you begin by explaining what these accusations actually consist of and where they come from? And from there, how do you interpret the broader meaning of these attacks for academic freedom and critical debate in Venezuela? Why do you think these attacks are happening now, and what do they reveal about the government’s priorities and fears at this moment?

Edgardo Lander: I think these accusations are simply another expression of what I’ve been describing—a government that wants to prevent any form of disagreement with its policies. It’s not only about repressing workers mobilizing for wages, or mothers demanding the freedom of their imprisoned sons. It’s also about saying that the intellectual community itself, simply by researching state policies, is committing an offense.

Take the case of research on what has happened in the Orinoco Mining Arc. Just investigating—asking, what has happened to Indigenous populations? Studies show, for example, that Indigenous children have high levels of mercury in their blood. That is research: documenting what is actually happening. But for the government, this is an attack on its authority, on its right to define whatever policies it deems appropriate.

So, when they name me personally, it’s not because I’ve done anything out of the ordinary—beyond offering opinions, participating in debates, and circulating ideas across Latin America. But the government sees that as a danger, as a threat. And therefore it has to be silenced. It has to try to make intellectuals, even those offering only moderately critical opinions, censor themselves—or avoid doing research that could compromise the government or highlight inconvenient realities.

This is a tightening grip, a siege that, I repeat, keeps closing in and closing in—until there is hardly even room to breathe.

Anderson Bean: In addition to individuals like yourself, well-known institutions such as the Faculty of Economic and Social Sciences at UCV, CENDES, and the Observatory of Political Ecology have also come under attack. Among them, the case of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation stands out, especially given its public ties to the German party Die Linke. For those who may not be familiar, could you explain what the Foundation is, what kind of work it has carried out in Venezuela, and why it might now be a target of attacks?

Edgardo Lander: First, for those who may not be familiar with the German political foundations, it’s worth explaining how they work. In the German political system, parties that have parliamentary representation above a certain threshold receive public funding for a political foundation linked to that party. The Social Democrats have a foundation, the Christian Democratic Party has one—the Adenauer Foundation—and the Left Party, Die Linke, has the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.

These foundations work mainly outside Germany, and their focus is on cultural and political debate. They are by no means political activists intervening directly in the affairs of other countries. In the case of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, it has offices across Latin America: in Mexico (covering Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean), in Brazil, in Argentina (for the Southern Cone), and in Quito, which covers Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, and Bolivia.

During the years of the progressive governments, the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation—and especially its Andean office in Quito—worked on an issue that has been central to Left and social movement debates in Latin America since the turn of the century: extractivism. The issue of what it means to keep pushing the mining frontier into new territories, and the devastation this causes to Indigenous lands across the continent.

On the one hand, progressive governments encouraged, celebrated, and activated processes of popular organization—from urban popular sectors to Indigenous peoples, pastoralists, and peasants. But extractivist policies also meant that when Indigenous peoples resisted the occupation of their territories, the state responded with repression.

So the question of extractivism, and of the broader development model pursued by progressive governments, is bound up with the civilizational crisis we face. It touches on the limits of the planet, on the rights of Indigenous peoples, on environmental threats. These are inherently political issues—they are not neutral, purely academic matters. They affect people’s lives directly.

That is why, in Venezuela today, even research or public criticism of extractivist policy—such as challenging the government’s strategy in the Orinoco Mining Arc—is treated as a direct attack on the state. Most recently, the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation has been singled out as a principal enemy, precisely because it has supported debates, studies, and movements that question the social and environmental costs of mining and extractivism. What is, in reality, the work of academic inquiry and movement-building is reframed by the government as political subversion.

Think, for example, of water. It’s hard to imagine a movement anywhere in the world today in defense of water that wouldn’t be political. Because if people are defending water, it’s because someone is doing something to contaminate or deplete it. That necessarily makes it a matter of debate, and debate always involves political positions.

So, the point is not that the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation is apolitical. The issues it works on—extractivism, Indigenous rights, environmental threats—inevitably have a political dimension. But it is in no way a foundation that

supports or finances policies aimed at undermining the Venezuelan government.

If there are groups investigating the Orinoco Mining Arc, and their reports show the extremely negative effects of illegal mining in that region, the government takes that as an attack against itself. And from there, the only alternative they leave is silence—no one says anything about anything.

The claim that the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation is funded by the German government and therefore part of a U.S. imperial project to undermine Venezuela is, apart from being paranoid, just an attempt to throw everything into the same bag and attack NGOs as a whole.

Of course, there are many small, diverse organizations working on issues like elections, the environment, human rights, women’s rights, and so on. Across Latin America, many of these groups receive external funding—sometimes from churches, sometimes from the European Union, sometimes from other sources. And the government tries to present all of this as part of one grand imperialist strategy to finance these organizations in order to subvert the government.

That doesn’t really make sense in any concrete way, but politically it makes perfect sense as a way of convincing the government’s base that Venezuela is under attack, and that anyone who appears neutral—or even sympathetic to Chavismo—but then criticizes government policies on issues the state considers vital, immediately becomes part of the enemy camp. And the enemy must be confronted.

This, of course, places the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation in a very difficult situation. It becomes extraordinarily hard for it to carry out its work. And the communities it has been working with—small farmers, peasants, and others—end up losing the support they had until now.

In any case, it’s important to be clear: this is a small foundation. It’s not sitting on millions and millions of dollars. Its projects are modest.

Anderson Bean: Why do you think these attacks are happening now, and what do they reveal about the government’s priorities and fears at this moment?

Edgardo Lander: I think what’s happening right now has to do with what I’ve already mentioned—the government feels increasingly isolated. It feels more and more isolated internationally, and increasingly discredited within the global Left, even if there are tensions and contradictions in that field. And of course, it also sees discontent within its own base.

First and foremost, this is because the living conditions of ordinary people are not improving. Today, the minimum wage in Venezuela is less than one U.S. dollar per month. It’s partially offset by various bonuses, handed out arbitrarily to whomever they want, whenever they want—used as a tool of political control over the population.

What we have is a government that long ago abandoned any political project. The whole discourse of deepening democracy, of socialism—those have simply disappeared from the horizon. The government’s practically sole objective now is its own survival in power.

To preserve itself, it used to rely on a certain level of popular support. But as that support has dwindled and dwindled, repression has become its only option. That’s why its rhetoric now leans so heavily on appeals to patriotism, nationalism, anti-imperialism, and external threats. In that narrative, everything gets thrown into the same bag.

NGOs, too, are lumped in—because the government needs to frame all of this not as threats to itself, but as threats to Venezuela.

Anderson Bean: Finally, many of those under attack, including yourself, are long-time collaborators with movements and comrades abroad. What forms of international solidarity are most useful at this stage?

Edgardo Lander: First, speaking not just about the present situation but in a more permanent sense, I want to return to a point I made earlier. For sectors of the Venezuelan Left who have lived through, and suffered from, what has happened in this country over these years, it is very painful to see intellectuals, organizations, and left-wing journalists who continue to describe Venezuela as a Left government, a socialist government, or a revolutionary government. That is heartbreaking, deeply painful—because it means ignoring all the evidence of what is happening in the country, shutting one’s eyes to reality, all in the name of confronting imperialism.

But confronting imperialism necessarily has to mean offering a way of life that is better than what imperialism offers—not worse. That is why I think the work you are doing, and the initiative of your book, is so valuable: it creates space for a serious, thoughtful, reasoned discussion of what is actually happening, rather than falling into a simplistic, Manichean debate between “good guys and bad guys,” or “anti-imperialists versus pro-imperialists.”

This is a matter of solidarity—not solidarity with a government, but solidarity with peoples. And this matters not just for Venezuela but also internationally. The word “socialism” is becoming more popular in certain parts of the world; in fact, the word attracts many people. But when “socialism” is equated with Venezuela, it undermines the appeal. That’s why it is absolutely essential to distinguish the Venezuelan experience from the dream of another possible world.

Now, in terms of the current moment, the international reaction to the detention of Marta Lía Grajales, and then to the accusations against the Central University of Venezuela, CENDES, and the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, must have come as a surprise to the government—because of the sheer level of rejection it provoked. And one of the defining characteristics of the Left has always been the notion of internationalism.

If we are to think about civilizational crisis, alternatives to development, resistance to extractivism—these cannot be thought within the confines of a single nation. They have to be approached through networks that cross borders. For example, during the struggle against the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA/ALCA) twenty years ago, there was a remarkable level of articulation across the continent: unions, students, public sector workers, peasants, Indigenous organizations, feminist movements, from across Latin America and including Canada and the United States. Those articulations created networks, knowledge, personal contacts, ways of sharing information.

Those networks and that knowledge are still alive in Latin America. They no longer have the vigor they had during the fight against the FTAA, but they endure. That’s why, so often, when something happens in one country of the region, there is a reaction across the continent—because the channels to communicate what is happening and to call for responses are still there.

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*Source: **Tempest**.*

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[1] Reuters, 3 September 2025 “US military kills 11 people in strike on alleged drug boat from Venezuela, Trump says.