

A Review of Autocracy Rising: How Venezuela Transitioned to Authoritarianism

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1. Book Reviews

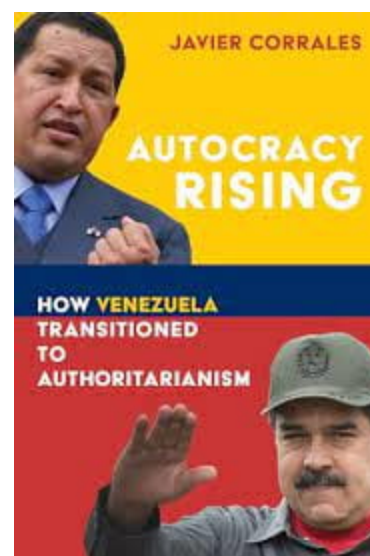
by [John Polga-Hecimovich](#) | Dec 21, 2023

Few people have written more lucidly about Venezuela's democratic decline and autocratization over the past 20 years, especially for an English-language audience, as political scientist Javier Corrales. Appropriately, a chronology of his Venezuela-centered publications also happens to trace the decline of the country's democratic fortunes, from the causes and effects of Hugo Chávez's rule (1999-2013) to the political economy of Chávez's hybrid regime to the "autocratic legalism" that Chávez and his successor, Nicolás Maduro (2013-present), employed in the mid- to late-2010s.

In many ways, Corrales' latest book, *Autocracy Rising: How Venezuela Transitioned to Authoritarianism*, represents the culmination of these two decades of scholarship and Venezuela's descent into dictatorship, as it offers a coherent, institution-centered theory for the processes of democratic backsliding, autocratization and regime survival. The book is undoubtedly a major work in democracy studies and is also one of the few English-language volumes published on Maduro and his ten years in power.

Corrales asks why some semi-authoritarian regimes become fully autocratic, while others remain in a hybrid state or transition to democracy. He is inspired, of course, by events in contemporary Venezuela—autocratization in the 2010s, the political opposition's failed plan to remove Maduro from office in 2019, and the seeming retrenchment of Maduro in power in the subsequent years—but also similar instances of democratic backsliding worldwide which have contributed to the so-called "third wave of autocratization."

He explains regime change by highlighting two factors. The first is the evolution of the party system, particularly what he describes as "asymmetric party system fragmentation." The second focuses on the executive branch's "institutional reservoirs," or tools to fend off legal and constitutional challenges from the opposition, including elections. He argues that in places where a ruling party becomes dominant while the opposition splinters into multiple factions, democratic



Autocracy Rising. How Venezuela Transitioned to Authoritarianism by Javier Corrales (Washington, DC: Brookings Institutions; 2023)

backsliding is more likely, as in several places in Latin America since the 2000s. When this power dynamic shifts, however, and the opposition rises while the government grows weaker, governments turn to autocracy as a survival tool.

This is a timely book and a worthy successor to Corrales' 2011 book *Dragon in the Tropics: Venezuela and the Legacy of Hugo Chávez*, written with Michael Penfold Becerra. While that volume links Venezuela's political transformation under Chávez to the weak framework of checks and balances that allowed the executive branch to extract and redistribute oil rents, this one explains the most recent phase of Venezuela's regime change as a result of declining rents, a weakened ruling party and renewed electoral support for a united opposition. As with *Dragon in the Tropics*, this book should appeal to social scientists as well as general audiences. With its analysis of the Venezuelan case and its contributions to theories of democratic backsliding, this is no doubt an essential resource for political scientists, Latin Americanists and students of political regimes. At the same time, because it is largely free of social science jargon and complicated mathematics, it is also accessible to policymakers, analysts and general audiences.

Corrales' basic two-part theory is surprisingly parsimonious, with its focus on the contours of the executive and the party system. First, he argues that the emergence of an illiberal leader of a unified ruling party in combination with a fragmented or uncompetitive opposition—that is to say, conditions of asymmetric party system fragmentation—will be more likely to induce democratic backsliding into semi-authoritarianism. The combination of these two conditions allows a leader to “destroy or colonize” liberal democratic institutions, since a fractured opposition is less capable of placing a break on an ambitious executive bent on concentrating power and eliminating horizontal accountability that are so central to a separation-of-powers system. In this way, the theory explains the situation under which Chávez was able to undermine democratic checks and balances while in power (although Corrales acknowledges the role of the opposition in contributing to democratic decline, he attributes the lion's share of the blame to the executive).

Second, Corrales explains how these same variables can drive a semi-authoritarian regime into full authoritarianism, albeit through a different causal path. Here, autocratization becomes more likely if the balance of power inverts itself, with the governing party losing electoral competitiveness and the opposition gaining strength and unity. The electoral threat of a newly resurgent opposition thus provides an illiberal leader with the incentive to become autocratic as a survival strategy, while institutional reservoirs such as autocratic legalism, manipulation of elections and control of the coercive apparatus provide the means.

In this sense, Corrales' theory is a twist on political scientist E.E. Schattschneider's famous “Goldilocks” theory of political parties, which argues that the most responsible party system is one in which parties are neither too weak nor too strong (American Political Science Association's Committee on Political Parties 1950).

The book proceeds in a straightforward manner, with chapters 2-5 breaking down the components of this theory in Venezuela: the rise of an illiberal leader, party system fragmentation, and democratic backsliding (chapter 2); the resurgence of a cohesive political opposition as a result of economic, social and humanitarian crisis (chapter 3) as well as party-building strategies (chapter 4), and then; the Maduro government's deployment of institutional reservoirs—inherited from Chávez—which led to authoritarianism (chapter 5). After this, Corrales applies his theory to three cases of democratic backsliding with APSF: Nicaragua under Daniel Ortega, Ecuador under Rafael Correa and Lenín Moreno, and Colombia under Álvaro Uribe (chapter 6). There, he shows that opposition strength, ruling party cohesiveness and leaders' institutional reservoirs led to full autocratization (Nicaragua), liberalization (Ecuador), and slight liberalization (Colombia).

The penultimate chapter introduces what he calls “function fusion,” an autocratic innovation by which a leader grants existing institutions the ability to perform a variety of functions typically reserved for other institutions. Although this term effectively explains Venezuela's recent evolution, it overlaps a bit with the concept of coup-proofing as developed by Erica de Bruin and other social scientists. This notion appears to be conceptually distinct from the institutional reservoirs that illiberal leaders turn to when their survival is at stake. At the same time, Corrales makes a good case for why this autocratic innovation is crucial to an authoritarian's survival.

The book's shortcomings are few. The biggest quibble for non-political scientists may be with Corrales' focus on institutional explanations at the expense of non-institutional sources of regime strength or regime change, such as social movements or even presidential agency. This might be relevant to, say, Guatemala, where the semi-authoritarian government of Alejandro Giammattei disqualified most viable candidates in anticipation of the 2023 president election. However, a weak opposition appears to have staved off further backsliding after massive social mobilization helped propel Bernardo Arévalo to an upset victory against the government's candidate, Sandra Torres, and seems to have frustrated the government in its attempts to prevent Arévalo from assuming power.

In a broader sense, it is a bit unclear what the limits of the theory are. For example, what explains backsliding in places with unified opposition parties or autocratization where the opposition remains weak? And, is this theory more predictive of democratic backsliding and autocratization in the contemporary world, or does it have a similar application to processes of backsliding in the mid-20th century? The comparative case studies do more to show the reaches of the theory rather than its limits. This is nitpicking, to be sure, but also suggests that we should understand *Autocracy Rising* as one of several possible interpretations of regime change and not the sole one.

Ultimately, the implications are manifold. On one hand, it is bad news for places with a collapsing or collapsed party system—some of which Corrales shows in chapter 6—from Peru to Guatemala, or places where illiberal demagogues have gained a majority legislative

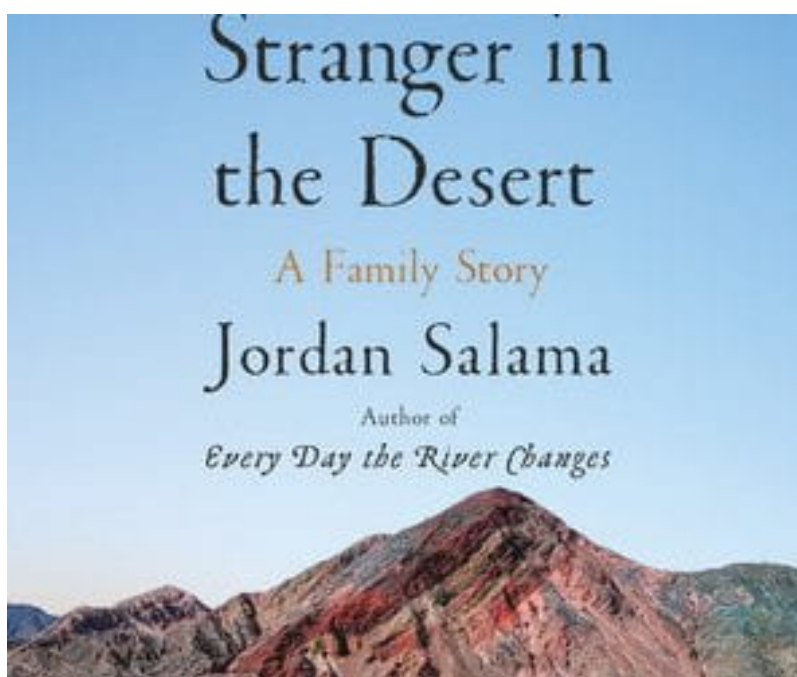
bloc in the wake of party system decline, as in El Salvador. Those countries are the most at risk of following Venezuela's disappointing democratic trajectory. At the same time, it suggests democratic backsliding will be more difficult in places like the United States, where a strong two-party system may frustrate voters but nearly guarantees a large, unified opposition to limit backsliding by an illiberal president like Donald Trump.

The theory also sheds light on Maduro's actions since the book was published, including (as of this writing) the government's disqualification of María Corina Machado as the presidential candidate of a united opposition. Yet, Corrales argues that electoral pressure through a well-organized opposition is exactly what is needed to contest the regime, arguing that while it may not prevail at every confrontation, "staying active contesting the regime electorally is one way to keep the ruling party from feeling too confident in office" (183). If the high participation in the opposition coalition's October 2023 primaries is any indication, leaders understand that mobilization rather than abstention is key to challenging Maduro's grip on power.

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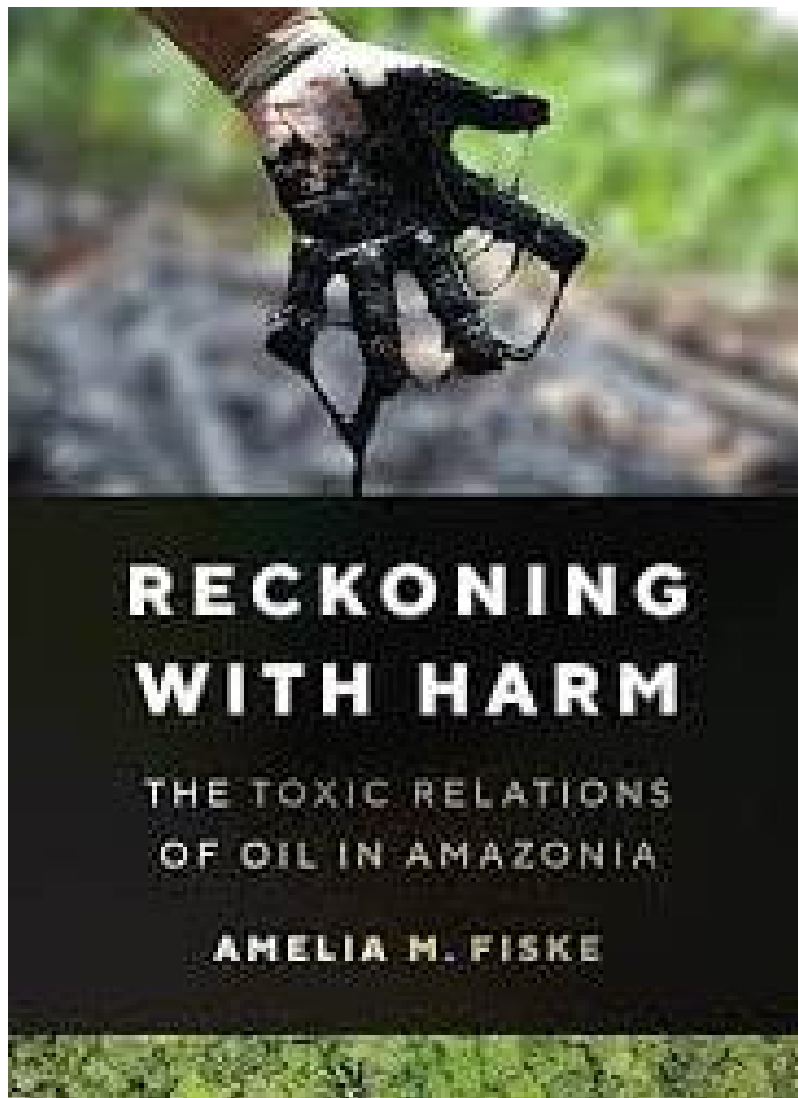
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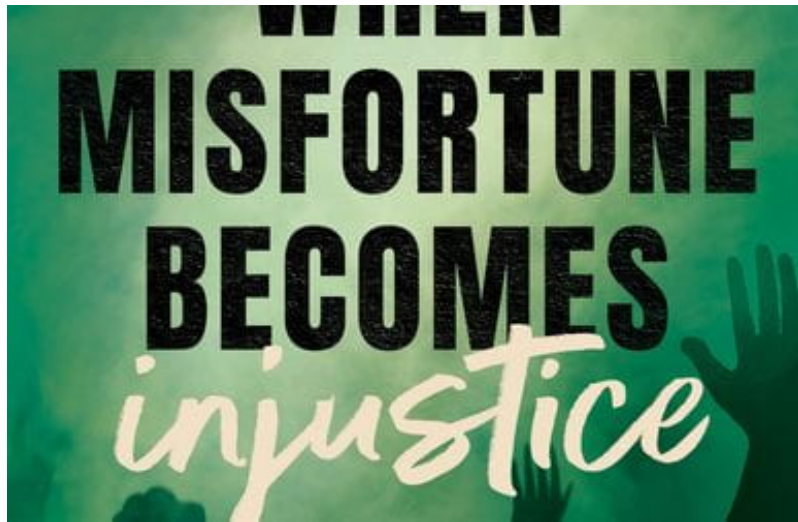
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