When fear grips power

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"Authoritarian regimes, though they appear stable, are often at constant risk of collapsing from within. Forced loyalty, fear, and propaganda cannot sustain power forever: all it takes is a few people in key positions switching sides, and the whole system can fall apart overnight." - Anne Applebaum

In a country long conditioned to absorb confrontation and propaganda as its native language, the recent remarks of General Vladimir Padrino López, Venezuela's Minister of Defense, on the Honor Patio of the Military Academy might have sounded routine—just another reiteration of anti-imperialist doctrine. But to the attentive ear, the tone betrayed something more revealing: fear.

Partially broadcast on state television, the speech was cloaked in the familiar vocabulary of defiance. Padrino denounced the United States, blamed global drug crime on "consumer markets," labeled the DEA "the world's largest cartel," and dismissed Hugo "El Pollo" Carvajal—the former intelligence chief under Hugo Chávez—as an unreliable witness in U.S. narcotrafficking trials.

But the novelty of this statement lies not in what was said, but in the fear with which it was delivered.

Because beneath the ceremonial cadence of military power was an inadvertent confession: the regime now understands that the tightening siege—legal, political, financial, and moral—is no longer just external. Those who now testify against it once sat at its very core.

The undeclared defeat

Authoritarian systems do not collapse when they lose legitimacy. They collapse when they lose control of fear.

- Fear is what enforces loyalty among generals.
- Fear is what prevents an ally from becoming an informant.
- Fear is what keeps the public from rising up.

But when that fear begins to reverse direction—when the dread no longer flows from the outside in, but from the palace corridors outward—the balance begins to crack.

Padrino's words were not aimed at Washington. They were meant for the Armed Forces High Command. For the civilian leadership of the ruling party. And most critically, for those contemplating cooperation with prosecutors in New York, Madrid, or The Hague.

When he warned of the "fragmentation of the national state," it wasn't a theoretical statement. It was an acknowledgment that loyalty is no longer uniform, that fractures have emerged, and that the regime's narrative is beginning to collapse from within.

Three familiar ghosts

The Venezuelan scene echoes past moments in the tragic theater of tyrannies and criminal enterprises.

It recalls Manuel Noriega, the Panamanian general undone by his own allies when his drug ties became unsustainable. Muammar Gaddafi, betrayed by his tribal-military network as it crumbled under internal dissent. Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, whose empire disintegrated under judicial pressure and betrayal from within.

All three believed themselves untouchable—until they were not. All three underestimated the slow, silent power of isolation.

Today, the Maduro-Cabello regime finds itself in a similar position. It no longer defends itself with expansive force but with reactive rhetoric. It no longer instills fear—it merely manages it.

The new art of cncirclement

During the Cold War, regimes were toppled by mass uprisings or military coups. In the 21st century, the siege is different.

There are no tanks, no landings.

There is no UN Security Council resolution.

What exists now is a slow, cumulative process:

- sworn testimonies in federal courts,
- coordinated financial sanctions,
- investigations by the International Criminal Court,
- former insiders turned into key witnesses.

Each is a brick in the tightening wall around the regime. It's a strategy not of force, but of attrition—where Maduro isn't overthrown but outlasted. Left with no allies, no oxygen.

The final act depends on the cast

There are signs the curtain is nearing its fall. The military's rhetoric is increasingly defensive. The ideological discourse lacks conviction. And the repressive machinery, though still intact, is showing signs of fatigue.

Regimes do not always fall with a bang. Sometimes they crumble quietly—like in the Philippines in 1986, Prague and Bucharest in 1989, Liberia in 1990, South Africa in 1994, Tunisia in 2011, Sudan in 2019. Or, perhaps, in Caracas in the months ahead.

Power in Venezuela will not be toppled by a march, an invasion, or a stirring speech. It will fall when the coalition holding it together decides that cooperating with democratic forces and international institutions is preferable to sinking with the ship.

As the cases of Noriega, Gaddafi, and El Chapo prove, that decision hinges on two factors: how tight the noose becomes, and whether a negotiated escape hatch is offered in time.

What comes next?

Modern international politics no longer revolves solely around wars and treaties. It pivots on institutions: prosecutors, judges, international courts, investigative journalists.

Hard power has been replaced by institutional persistence.

Venezuela today is a case study in how 21st-century tools—legal instruments, moral accountability, strategic patience—can encircle a criminal state from within.

The ending is unwritten. But the trajectory is undeniable.

The regime no longer governs with authority. It patches itself together. And it fears what approaches from abroad as much as what is unraveling from within.

Because in mafia states, walls don't fall from explosives.

They rot—quietly, inevitably—from the inside out.