From Marginalization to Co-optation: Venezuelan Evangelicals, Identification Repentance and the Dominion Theology Behind Support for Nicolás Maduro in the 2024 Elections

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After his questionable re-election in 2018, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro Moros (NMM) began a campaign to attract the attention of evangelical leaders, apostles, prophets, pastors, and church members to secure their votes for the 2024 campaign. The main reason for this move was the surprising growth of the evangelical population in the country, which reached almost 30% by the end of 2023. Several independent churches and denominations accepted NMM's invitation to meet and participate in government programs specifically targeted at evangelical churches. Despite allegations of human rights abuses, corruption, and violations of the Venezuelan constitution, some evangelicals created a narrative about NMM as the "protector of families" and as God's chosen one to usher in a new era of prosperity for the nation. Through acts of "identificational" repentance staged at the Miraflores Palace, a contrite NMM received prophetic declarations and prayers from apostles and pastors, and the country was cleansed of curses and satanic influences. This article seeks to document, analyze, and situate these discourses in relation to contemporary theological trends, as an important case of evangelical alignment with left-wing politics in Latin America. Moreover, the article also seeks to show how these events relate to the evolution of Venezuelan evangelical involvement in national politics, particularly under 25 years of socialist governments of Hugo Chávez Frías and Nicolás Maduro Moros.

Keywords: Venezuelan Evangelicals; Venezuelan Elections; Neo-Pentecostalism and Politics; Apostolic Churches and Politics

Introduction:

A few decades ago, it was common to imagine evangelical and Pentecostal churches in Latin America as a network of small congregations in poor neighborhoods of growing cities, led by amateur pastors with minimal biblical training. The Catholic Church considered these evangelical groups to be undesirable sects, thus creating all kinds of difficulties for them to be legally registered by governments, to own property, to establish seminaries, to have access to mass media, to hold public crusades, and many other restrictions. Although evangelicals endured "social stigmatization and violent persecution" [1] for several decades, they continued to expand [2] and became a somewhat safe refuge for migrants from rural regions to metropolitan centers [3]. These small communities helped migrants bear the burdens of city life, extreme poverty, homesickness, low-skilled jobs, and government indifference, providing discipline, strict moral standards, psychological and economic security, and the basic education to maintain a dignified life in megacities. Thus, migrants, displaced persons, and marginalized populations, affected by the cyclical political and economic crises in Latin America, joined

thousands of these evangelical churches that sprang up in barrios and favelas, preaching a new world vision, and new social and personal norms, with an escapist rhetoric and an apocalyptic discourse characterized by the search for purity, separation from worldly distractions, isolation from community participation, rejection of active political participation, and the constant expectation of the rapture or the second coming of Jesus (Parousia).

Over the years, evangelical congregations slowly adapted their message to address real-life issues such as addiction, violence, family conflicts, inadequate housing, homelessness, and others, making these everyday aspects part of their "religious quest". With the Pentecostalization of these congregations [4], through the experience of intense spiritual manifestations, the use of contemporary worship music, and the introduction of ministries of healing, deliverance, and spiritual warfare, combined with the traditional evangelical quadrilateral message (biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism, activism/mission), Latin American evangelical churches prepared for the monumental numerical growth of the last two decades of the 20th century and throughout the 21st century. Today, evangelical churches in Latin America reflect the diversity of the population, including farmers, factory workers, housewives, executives, students, military officers, entrepreneurs, athletes, and politicians, representing all sectors and social classes of society.

A long, uneven process of religious deregulation began in the region in the 1970s, leading to an increase in the evangelical population from 4% in 1970 (the breakpoint of religious growth) to 19% in 2014 (with a steep slope), with a corresponding drastic reduction in the Catholic population to 69% [5]. In some countries, such as Venezuela, the numerical changes have been drastic, demonstrating the religious transformation of the country, albeit with a delay compared to other parts of Latin America, where the evangelical church is also expanding, and the Catholic Church is losing its hegemony and control [6]. Figure 1 shows the changes observed in Venezuela from 1995 to 2023, based on data collected by Latinobarometro1, a public opinion research NGO, which shows that the evangelical population went from 4.5% in 1995 to 31.4% at the end of 2023, with a rapid slope starting in 2018. The graph shows the growth of the evangelical population in the last 25 years, which corresponds to the four periods of socialist government under Hugo Chávez Frías and Nicolás Maduro Moros.

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Beyond their apparent numerical growth, Venezuelan evangelicals began to slowly undergo a process that [7] describes as a transformation from a "negative dualism", in which the church seeks to escape from a sinful world to a "positive dualism", in which the church is moved to establish God's kingdom to reverse the sinfulness of the nation. This transformation has been addressed from a theoretical standpoint, who proposed the concept of mineralization as a framework for understanding the recent emergence of evangelicals as new actors that make visible new visions of the world, new understandings of power, new demands, and new forms of socialization, by claiming political representation against a backdrop of historical isolation, marginalization, and undervaluation. In other words, for Burity, evangelicals are an emerging minority: with its own voice, its own demands, and a sense of action that uses a repertoire of collective action already tested in the context of modernity: the construction of a differentiated identity, self-assertion as a legitimate being or actor, articulation of a demand for rights, and coalition-building with other minorities (and dissident sectors of the majority).

Through mineralization, evangelicals create a new political subjectivity, challenging traditional secular views with Christian values or biblical ideals, claiming a place within the national identity from which they had fled for doctrinal reasons or had been relegated by the religious status quo to become part of the "pueblo" [8], seeking to be recognized as social agents contributing to the deliberation of common national agendas in the different countries of the region [9].

According to [10] interpretation of Burity's proposal, this point of view has the virtue of not ignoring the heterogeneous religious identity of evangelicals and of not falling into the common error of classifying it as a conservative ideology, which tends to favor its affiliation only with extreme right-wing political parties. As we will see in another section of this article, the political engagement of Venezuelan evangelicals has gone through several stages in which we can observe a multiplicity of approaches, discourses, ideologies, groups, spaces, issues, and, finally, theologies: sometimes creating tensions among different evangelical groups and, at other times, collectively in tension with political actors who seek to undermine and delegitimize evangelical concerns.

With this openness in mind, this article seeks to document and understand the political involvement and mineralization process of a significant number of evangelical leaders in favor of Nicolás Maduro Moros (NMM) during the controversial 2024 presidential campaign. This involvement, represented by several public staged events that began in 2019, serves to understand the changes in the perception and characterization of Venezuelan evangelicals by the government, politicians, media, and the Catholic Church: how the different evangelical leaders gradually acquire a political identity, how their view of the Gospel serves to interpret and address the national crisis, and how they introduce pneumatic2 rituals and performances and biblical-centered messages that convey an evangelical interpretation of the political moment. To better understand this context, let us now turn to an overview of Venezuelan evangelical involvement in politics since the 1980s, where important signposts of this evolution serve to characterize and understand the unprecedented role of evangelicals in the electoral campaign of a radical socialist candidate, in contrast to the generalized perception of Latin American evangelicals' alignment with right-wing politicians.

Evolution of the Political Involvement of Venezuelan Evangelicals:

Evangelicals have gone from being a despised and underestimated group to becoming a population that claims to be an important and decisive factor in the political scenario of each Latin American country. Several research works have been published to explain the growing involvement of Latin American evangelicals in politics during the 21st century [10] despite the similarities in the evolution of evangelical political participation in the different countries of the region, the differences are also enormous [11], and for this reason, each nation needs to be considered individually. Unfortunately, the specific case of Venezuelan evangelical involvement in politics has been somewhat overlooked in the literature, leading to the common assumption that the evangelical church in the country is aligned with the political right. As we will see in this section and in the case of the 2024 presidential elections, which will be analyzed later, the process of mineralization of Venezuelan evangelicals has been markedly different from that of other countries in the region, particularly due to its orientation in favor of the left-wing revolutionary transformation initiated by Hugo Chávez Frías. Let us look at some of the turning points of this evolution in the following paragraphs.

After years of religious discrimination and rejection by the Catholic elite, one of the first political battles faced by Venezuela's traditionally apolitical evangelicals was to defend the permanence of the New Tribes Mission (NTM)3, which had been operating in the southern state of Amazonas since 1946. Several allegations against the US-based mission surfaced in the 1970s, prompting the Venezuelan Congress to launch an investigation into the NTM. During the investigation, which began in early 1980, the Venezuelan Evangelical Council (CEV)4, an interdenominational body of churches, strongly supported the NTM and had to participate in debates, congressional sessions, and media interviews to testify in favor of the mission and raise the banner of religious freedom, leading to the dismissal of the charges by the Congress For Venezuelan evangelicals, this marked the beginning of the process of mineralization, even though it involved defending a foreign mission that, at the time, was operating outside the purview of Venezuelan evangelical churches5.

The CEV's success in defending the NTM by engaging government officials and political representatives in public meetings on the issue, lobbying and recruiting supporters, and raising funds in local churches suggested that the creation of an evangelical political party was possible. Following a regional trend of "translating religious demands into political parties", based on the premise that "evangelicals vote for evangelicals" or "hermano vota por hermano", the party Organización Renovadora Auténtica (ORA) was registered with the Electoral Council in 1987. Professor Godofredo Marín of the UCV School of Chemical Engineering became the presidential candidate of the ORA in the 1988 general elections, with a platform based on "Bible-based democracy" and "social change through the family", which he described in several books. The party received less than 1% of the vote but secured two seats in Congress. ORA returned with the same candidate for the 1993 elections and later, in 1998, supported the candidate of the traditional social democratic party Acción Democrática (AD), a decision that drew criticism from evangelicals. The results for ORA were even worse and more disappointing each time, to the point of almost disappearing. In 2010, the party was revived with a controversial legal maneuver to promote a state–religion–people alliance with what was called a "pluralist Christology", and since then, without changing its brand name, ORA has supported both Hugo Chávez Frías (HCF) and NMM in the general elections, contributing around 40,000 votes in 2018 [12].

However, the big change for the role of popular religion in Venezuelan politics came from HCF's public recognition of evangelicals as an important player during his first presidential campaign in 1998 and during his whole administration, which lasted from 1999 to 2012. David Smilde, a professor of political science at Tulane University, has written extensively on evangelical–government relations in a series of articles and books that cover this period in Venezuelan history, in which new approaches, new actors, and new power relations emerged in the process of evangelical mineralization [13][14][15]. In some ways, many of the changes that occurred during this period laid the groundwork for understanding the evolution of the relationship between the socialist regime and evangelicals, even during the Nicolás Maduro Moros (NMM) government.

By the 1990s, evangelical and Pentecostal churches had spread throughout Venezuela's poor barrios, lower-class neighborhoods, and rural towns, the very social classes that had built HCF's enormous popularity and ultimately helped him win the 1998 presidential election by a landslide [16]. Because of its longstanding work among the poor, groups like the Unión Evangélica Pentecostal de Venezuela (UEPV) quickly came on board with HCF's candidacy in 1998, eventually proposing a "Bolivarian Liberation Theology" as a "revolutionary expression of the Christian faith" where socialism and the teachings of Jesus could find common ground. Nevertheless, the UEPV was a very small denomination, somewhat disconnected from the mainstream Pentecostalism and the Neo-Pentecostalism that was spreading rapidly throughout the country.

Cleverly, Chávez gradually gained the support of evangelicals by keeping their needs and struggles, the Bible, and Christ as recurring themes in his messages and speeches, and by making public demonstrations of his faith that seemed authentic. This support has continued throughout the 25 years of the socialist revolution, despite evangelicals' dislike for the authoritarianism of some of its leaders. Evangelicals sincerely believed that the Lt. Colonel had received Christ as Savior while serving a prison sentence for his failed coup in February 1992, when he was visited by evangelical television celebrities who shared the Gospel with him and others. In addition, points out that Chávez did not betray the support he received from evangelicals during the elections; instead, during the first months of the government, several actions were taken that favored evangelical churches, such as speeding up the legal registration of churches.

Perhaps the most important contribution of the new socialist government in favor of evangelical growth was the change introduced in the text of the 1999 Constitution of the RBV, which expanded the 1961 Constitution, regarding freedom of religion. The new text included a full guarantee of freedom of religion and worship for all persons, in private or in public, and the independence of churches and denominations [17]. While the wording appears to be similar to the previous constitution, the intervention of government authorities is guided by a more open view of religion, and in practice, the constitution and the laws derived from it would limit the entrenched interventionism of the Catholic Church, which would veto the registration and operation of any evangelical church or any non-Christian faith in the country. At the same time, relations between the government and the Catholic Church became strained, beginning with verbal attacks and statements that continue to this day. To make matters worse, the revolutionary government tried to end the modus vivendi agreement signed between the Vatican and the Venezuelan state in 1964, which established the terms of the relationship between the Catholic Church and the government, including the salaries for priests, the construction of temples, and support for other activities [18]. As a result of these changes, the number of evangelicals (mostly independent Pentecostals) jumped from 5.8% to 12.7% during the 12 years of Hugo Chávez's government, creating a growth trend that is still ongoing, changing the weight of evangelicals in Venezuelan politics [19].

Other aspects to consider in these 12 years of continuous evangelical growth in Venezuela are the nature of the new churches being planted and the changes in the traditional denominations and independent churches that already existed. For the most part, Neo-Pentecostalism has been at the forefront of the expansion, with a variety of new doctrines and teachings that have made it very appealing to Venezuelans. As in the rest of Latin America, prosperity theology, contemporary worship, spiritual warfare, healing and deliverance ministries, and cell groups became quite popular, attracting believers from traditional denominations or leading to the conversion of thousands of new believers. Not only did churches begin to grow numerically, but new churches were being planted every week in every corner of the country. Neo-Pentecostal churches also left their denominations and began to unite in national and global networks that introduced new paradigms of church government, such as the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR) [20]. Pastors became apostles, prophets, or bishops, many of whom gained increasing popularity and economic power that could be channeled into the political sphere. In addition, a new eschatology replaced the old premillennial preaching of the imminent return of Christ to rapture the saints; this escapist theology was replaced by a post-millennial view that required the kingdom of God to be established on earth before Christ's return. This new hermeneutical key to understanding the Bible gave the newly formed church networks the impetus to engage in new areas, particularly the socio-political transformation of Venezuela. The involvement was no longer about defending religious freedom or defending evangelical groups like the NTM, but now apostles, bishops, and prophets saw themselves as active participants in bringing Christian rule to all spheres of society. The new interpretations of political involvement were quite different from those of a premillennial hermeneutic and led to bolder, more innovative, and aggressive approaches by the churches in the public sphere.

Examples of this development are the Renacer network led by bishop Jesús Pérez Mata and the REDIMA apostolic network founded under the apostolic leadership of Guido Raúl Ávila, which today has more than 300 member churches [21]. The apostles and bishops believed that HCF had been prophesied as a kind of modern-day Cyrus (Isaiah 45)8, who acted as an emissary of God or as God's own hand to bring change to the land, and therefore, Christians should not "quarrel with the Creator" (Isaiah 45:9) by opposing his plans. This support from Neo-Pentecostal and Neo-Apostolic networks to HCF also signaled a new pattern, in which evangelicals openly endorsed a socialist government. Thus, in addition to the

bodies that have traditionally represented Venezuelan evangelicals in the country, such as the Consejo Evangélico de Venezuela (CEV) and the Confraternidad Pentecostal de Venezuela (CPV), new neo-Pentecostal and neo-Apostolic church networks have emerged with great force, changing the characteristics of Venezuelan evangelicalism in the 21st century.

One of the most striking differences in the development of Venezuelan evangelical participation in politics compared to the rest of Latin America is the involvement of the military sector. In the years following HCF's presidential victory, many high-ranking military officers who worked for the government in various capacities either became Christians or began to feel empowered to publicly demonstrate their faith. The relevant aspect of the previous observations is that these influential high-ranking military officers, who became politicians during Chávez's government, in addition to having direct access to the president, were also part of the growing Venezuelan Neo-Pentecostal and Neo-Apostolic churches, which they would help in many ways in the years to come, such as providing aid to foundations for the homeless, facilitating permits for radio and television stations, and providing important donations for rallies and crusades, as well as facilitating permits and the use of public spaces 10, and some of these high-ranking officers have even planted Neo-Pentecostal or Neo-Apostolic churches11. Officers such as Liutenant Ronald Blanco La Cruz12, Major Edgar Hernández Behrens13, and General Gustavo Rangel Briceño, the first evangelical to become Minister of Defense in 2007, who created the Evangelical Pastoral Council of the Armed Forces14, initiated a trend of evangelicals in the armed forces that has continued and which has been fundamental to the NMM government's approach to the evangelical sector.

Another aspect that has not yet been explored is the impact among evangelicals of Venezuela's relationship with the State of Israel and its recognition of the Palestinian National Authority. In January 2009, Hugo Chávez expelled the Israeli ambassador to Venezuela and broke off diplomatic relations. In the same year, the Venezuelan government, through its foreign minister, NMM, established diplomatic relations with the Palestinian National Authority, further straining Venezuelan–Israeli relations. Later, in June 2010, President Chávez cursed the State of Israel in a public act, saying, "I curse you, State of Israel. I curse you, terrorist and murderous state. Long live the Palestinian people", marking the end of diplomatic relations to this day. One of the most vocal evangelicals who tried to warn HCF about his decisions regarding Israel was the pastor and retired captain of the Venezuelan Air Force (FAV), Jaime Banks Puertas, founder and president of one of the largest Pentecostal denominations in the country, Organización Evangélica la Luz del Mundo (OELLM). In several public letters, he insisted that HCF should rectify his fiery rhetoric against Israel and reconcile with God. Using scriptures such as Zechariah 14:12 and 2:8, he warned of the "terrible punishment for those who speak evil of Israel". In this warning, the fate of those who insult Israel is very dark, with deadly consequences.

These words from pastor Banks Puertas are very important for the formation of the collective imagination of the evangelical organizations in Venezuela. It is well known that shortly after these historic events, President HCF was diagnosed with terminal cancer, beginning with symptoms in his legs, as in the prophecy of Zechariah. After a period of convalescence and treatment in Cuba and Venezuela, he died on 5 March 2013. Hugo Chávez's death has become an illustration often used when evangelicals preach about Christian Zionism, because it represents a verifiable demonstration of what it means to curse Israel. For Venezuelan and Latin American evangelicals, Chavez would become a contemporary prototype of those rulers and kings who cursed Israel and were punished by God. Consequently, Venezuelan evangelical pastors began to refer to the event as "the curse that destroyed the country", adding that it could only be removed through repentance, something that will become more relevant during the 2024 election campaign, as we will see in the next section.

The idea of the existence of demonic spiritual strongholds that prevent the country from progressing socially and economically is present in the spiritual warfare theology of Neo-Pentecostal and Neo-Apostolic networks. In this regard, one aspect that has been an obstacle for evangelical apostles and pastors to maintain their support for the socialist regime has been the alleged association of high-ranking officials, especially the late HCF, with occult practices such as Cuban Santeria and the Venezuelan cult of Maria Lionza [22]. Thus, in addition to the negative impact on Venezuela of HCF's cursing of Israel, evangelicals were also concerned about the consequences of the government's association with occultism, which, according to the theology of spiritual warfare, would open the doors to demonic strongholds and influences in the nation. To make matters worse, after HCF's death, a form of idolatrous cult began to emerge among his followers, especially in Caracas. This idolatry began with the official rhetoric that coined the nickname "El Comandante Eterno" (The Eternal Commander) to refer to HCF, and the phrase "la siembra" (the sown) to talk about his death. The religious cult of HCF is still in its infancy, practically limited to popular areas near the mausoleum in his honor, located in downtown Caracas, but it could easily be assimilated into the syncretism of other popular spiritualist cults. All these spiritual practices, which evangelicals consider blasphemous and prone to creating satanic possessions and strongholds because they go against God's commandments established in the Bible, began to alienate them politically from HCF's government. This led evangelicals to seek other alternatives to make their voices heard, to find new ways to become more influential, and to gain more power by gaining access to key positions in governmental institutions, so that these deviations, which, according to their worldview, were destroying the nation, could be reversed.

It should be noted that the idea of creating a confessional political party persisted, and several new organizations were registered between 2003 and 2018, with very limited success compared to the immense official Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV) and a constellation of centrist and right-wing opposition parties. Nevertheless, the idea of "hermano vota por hermano" persisted among members and leaders of the larger churches and networks in the country. Along these lines, the Solución Party was founded in 2006 by Lorenzo Tovar, a politician who had recently become evangelical, with the idea of channeling the evangelical vote in the 2006 presidential election to an opposition candidate against HCF, who was seeking re-election for a second term15. Later, in 2010, the Movimiento Apostólico Iberoamericano convened a summit in Caracas with 70 apostolic leaders from all over Latin America and produced the document called the Pacto de Caracas, which, in one of its sections on regional politics, stated the following:

As an apostolic church, we are called to educate ourselves and to engage the practice of politics... We must work for the formation of pious and just men and women who can occupy positions of authority in society and thus reflect the government of the kingdom of God on earth. We therefore encourage the children of God to accept the challenge of participating in politics, in the formation of electoral or political groups, to participate actively in popular electoral processes and thus be able to aspire to occupy positions as presidents of nations, governors, mayors, representatives in national assemblies and other councils.

Following this declaration, in 2012, the apostolic networks REDIMA and UNICRISTIANA, together with other coalitions throughout the country, founded the "Christian nationalist" party NUVIPA (Nueva Visión para Mi País). According to the founders, the decision was made after hearing a prophetic voice that said to "take the necessary steps to enter the political arena" to "choose your ruler from among your brothers" (Deuteronomy 17:15), so that "when the righteous are in power, the people will rejoice" (Proverbs 29:2)16. In other words, Christians should elect national authorities from their own churches, and because of their special relationship with God, once they are in power, citizens will live happily. With these beliefs in mind, NUVIPA nominated Eusebio Méndez as its

candidate in the 2013 presidential elections, right after the death of HCF, and he received 19,497 votes (0.13%). That same year, in the 2013 municipal elections, the party grew to 63,762 votes (0.57%) nationwide. Four years later, in the 2017 regional elections, the party nominated candidates in several states without much success. However, because NUVIPA did not participate in the 2018 presidential election, which was considered "illegitimate" by many opposing democratic organizations, the party was disqualified from participating in the 2020 election by the government-controlled Electoral Council.

In 2018, prosperity preacher and pastor Javier Bertucci entered the electoral race to challenge Nicolás Maduro Moros for the presidency of the country. Bertucci is the senior pastor of the Maranatha megachurch in Valencia, Venezuela, which also has a network in the country and some international locations. He currently heads three legally constituted associations in Venezuela: a religious organization (Maranatha), a non-profit civil association (El Evangelio Cambia), and a political party (El Cambio). Despite a series of questions and possible commercial scandals, including ongoing lawsuits, to support the projects of these three associations, there is a large network of companies in sectors as diverse as oil, agriculture, food and medicine imports, healthcare, books and stationery, and construction, with headquarters in several Venezuelan cities and other countries [23]. The civil association is responsible for direct social assistance and evangelistic outreach in slums and low-income areas.

Due to the illegitimacy of the electoral process called by Maduro's regime, Bertucci's nomination in 2018 was viewed with suspicion by other opposition candidates, suggesting that there was some kind of agreement to legitimize the electoral process. Despite these criticisms, in the 2018 presidential election, Bertucci's social and religious capital allowed him to obtain more than one million votes (11% of the total) against Nicolás Maduro (PSUV) and Henry Falcón (Avanzada Progresista), in what is considered an election with one of the highest abstention rates in Venezuelan history. Later, the Maranatha/El Cambio party managed to present 4430 candidates in 335 municipalities of the country in the municipal elections of 2019, surpassing the main traditional opposition party groups. Another achievement of the Maranatha/El Cambio party was to win four seats in the National Assembly in the December 2020 legislative elections, becoming the second opposition bench [24].

The four Maranatha/El Cambio deputies have assumed an apostolic mission within the Venezuelan National Assembly. Through their actions, the Assembly created a permanent commission on "Families and Freedom of Religion and Cults"17, including evangelical representatives of the ruling party (PSUV), to discuss, among other things, the pending law on religion. In 2021, they facilitated the presentation of a proposal by a group of apostles and pastors to the Commission for Dialogue, Peace and National Reconciliation (CDPR) of the Assembly [25], which appointed a sub-commission composed of pastors and parliamentarians, including pastors Javier Bertucci and retired FAV Lt. Colonel Alfonso Campos Jessurun both from Maranatha/El Cambio; PSUV representative Moisés García, pastor and director of the "socio-political" network called Movimiento Cristiano Evangélico Venezolano (MOCEV)18; PSUV representative Carola Chávez; and apostles Ignacio Yllaramendy (MOVIUC network) and Carlos Mendoza. Interestingly, the wide range of aspects proposed by the pastors to the CDPR expresses a combination of typical evangelical interests, while others pretend to be in line with the regime's policies, such as the following:

To develop the Law on Religion and Cults; to recognize the Evangelical Church beyond that of a group of federations; to create a Commission on Morality and Spirituality by the National Assembly; to protect the original marriage; to avoid congressional bills that legalize abortion; to propose pastors as justices of peace in the communities; instill a more humane character in state security officials; strengthen and support the anti-blockade law previously approved by the National Constitutional Assembly in 2017; defend Venezuela's

right to sovereignty over the Essequibo region; promote respect for the law; and promote the principles of honesty among public officials.

After the 2018 elections, Bertucci and his party remained quite active in Venezuelan politics, even to the point of running again for the presidency in a deeply polarized and conflicted election in 2024. Bertucci's insistence on running again came even after he lost by a wide margin in 2021 in his bid to become governor of Carabobo state, where the main campus of his Maranatha megachurch is located. Critics saw the political action as a way to create an opposition front that could be manipulated by the NMM government. As expected, the results obtained in the fraudulent 2024 elections were negligible (0.19%), but he ended up recognizing the initial results presented by the Electoral Council and later accepted the ruling of the Tribunal Supremo de Justicia (TSJ), which declared NMM as the president-elect through a questionable judicial maneuver without corroborating the actual results of the polling stations (see next section).

Within the current hegemonic government of the PSUV, in which all constitutional powers—executive, legislative, judicial, moral, and electoral—have been coopted by the executive branch of the government, other groups of evangelicals have found ways to access political power in the state structure. Thus, in parallel with the collective actions described in the previous paragraphs, a growing number of evangelicals have populated government institutions such as the state-owned oil company (PDVSA) and the judiciary as lawyers and judges; others have been elected in electoral processes to serve as congressmen, governors, mayors, city council members, and other positions. Many have risen through the ranks of the official party, the PSUV, to obtain nominations and other leadership positions in state-owned companies and organizations. Moreover, the number of evangelicals in the armed forces has grown to unprecedented levels, reducing the importance of the Catholic Church within the institution, as evidenced by the now customary blessing by evangelical chaplains during official military ceremonies and parades. The significance of this infiltration, which has been gradual over the last 25 years of the Bolivarian socialist government, became more apparent to the PSUV when the party lost one million votes to the pastor-candidate Javier Bertucci in the 2018 presidential elections. Immediately, several strategic actions were launched by the government, giving more importance to the growing evangelical electorate, which the PSUV could easily reach through the large base of believers who were already part of the socialist regime.

Immediately after the 2018 elections, NMM proposed to a group of evangelical pastors the creation of a new evangelical political movement. In early 2019, the Movimiento Cristiano Evangélico por Venezuela (MOCEV) was launched as a socio-political network with Pastor Moisés García as its main leader (@prmoisesgarcia). MOCEV soon issued a statement recognizing NMM as the legitimate president and calling on the opposition to do the same. MOCEV began organizing, creating branches in each state according to a hierarchical structure that allowed García to be elected to the National Assembly in 2020. In late 2019, MOCEV organized a meeting at the Military Officers' Club in Caracas attended by NMM, other government officials, and over 1700 evangelical leaders [26]. The President promised to issue executive decrees to declare a National Day of the Evangelical Pastor and a National Bible Day, to create "Government Pastoral Councils" (CPGs) in each state, to initiate a program to provide aid for the construction and maintenance of churches, and to develop a large-scale agricultural program led by evangelical pastors. In March 2020, the first Consejo Pastoral de Gobierno (CPG) del Distrito Capital (Caracas Pastoral Council) was installed by the then Mayor of Caracas, Erika Farías [26], but the actual official incorporation of the CPG as part of the local government was not issued until June 2021. The Caracas CPG has grown with a variety of activities that include health campaigns, inner healing workshops, prayer and fasting meetings, evangelization, support for the March for Jesus 2023 and 2024, door-to-door

visits (Ruta del Buen Pastor), rebuilding and restoring parks and squares, youth rallies, worship festivals, and much more.

The Caracas CPG was strongly supported by the deputy governor of the capital district, Nahum Fernández, a committed evangelical and the son of apostle Isabel Fernández, who has also been instrumental in the PSUV's outreach to churches throughout the country. Following the experience of the Caracas CPG, several other councils have been formed in states and counties throughout the country. The strategy aims at a socialist unification of state and religion, in which the churches become one of the arms of the government's social programs. This approach to the mineralization of evangelicals in national politics seeks to build a path of public influence where the evangelical language is translated into the political language, leading to what Burity has called "the Pentecostalization of society", but the movement has been co-opted by the government or the PSUV party.

The content of this section serves to establish the context in which NMM's regime approached this important segment of the population, ahead of the 2024 presidential elections, to secure their support. In particular, NMM's government, whose legitimacy has been widely questioned nationally and internationally by many countries around the world since 2019, was looking for a strong internal validation from a respected and rapidly growing sector of the electorate. For this reason, in 2022, in anticipation of the re-election campaign, Nicolás Maduro Guerra (NMG), NMM's son, was appointed vice president of religious affairs of the PSUV, with the specific task of gaining the support of different religious groups, especially evangelicals. In one of the many activities with evangelicals, NMG candidly gives his testimony as follows:

When the President called me, he said, "I want a direct connection with the people of God. Therefore, I want you to take on the task of religious affairs, to have a direct connection with the people of God who are on their knees asking for blessings for Venezuela". And in this task, the first opportunity I had to speak to the people of God, I must confess that I was intimidated. What am I going to say to the wise, to the people who communicate with our Lord? And a friend came up to me and said, "Open the Bible". And from that moment on, every time I must speak, I open the Bible, and the Bible answers me.

With the help of MOCEV, the CPGs, the ORA party, the large base of PSUV believers, and other groups, NMG would have ample space to secure evangelical support for the 2024 elections. In addition to the internal workings, lobbying, and offering of benefits, the campaign required the public display of this support, using state television, social media, and all available communication channels to gain further nationwide attention from churches and believers. In another section of this article, taking into account this highly complex context, four key public displays of evangelical support for NMM during the 2024 campaign will be documented and analyzed from a theological perspective. Let us now turn our attention to the complexities of the 2024 Venezuelan presidential electoral process.

Table 1. Evolution of Venezuelan Evangelical Political Involvement (1980s–2024)

Period	Key Developments	Main Actors / Organizations	Outcome / Significance
1980s–1990s	Defense of New Tribes Mission; formation of ORA party	CEV, ORA	First public political engagement
1998–2012 (Chávez era)	ChÃ¡vezâ€™s outreach to evangelicals; constitutional changes	UEPV, CEV, growing Neo-Pentecostal networks	Rapid numerical growth; initial alignment

2013–2018 (Maduro early)	Military evangelicals rise; apostolic networks expand	REDIMA, MOVIUC, NUVIPA	Infiltration into institutions; minoritization
2018–2023	Bertucci candidacy; MOCEV creation; CPGs established	Maranatha/El Cambio, MOCEV, CPGs	Direct government engagement; social programs
2024 Elections	Four major public events with Maduro; dominion theology rhetoric	MOCEV, MMN, apostolic networks	Co-optation and public legitimization of Maduro

Table 2. Comparison of Evangelical Political Strategies in Venezuela vs. Regional Trends

Aspect	Traditional Latin American Pattern	Venezuelan Pattern (Chávez/Maduro Era)	Key Difference
Political Alignment	Predominantly right-wing / conservative parties	Alignment with left-wing socialist governments	Shift from right to left
Theological Emphasis	Premillennial eschatology; separation from world	Post-millennial; dominion theology & 7MM	Active conquest of society's "mountains"
Relationship with State	Opposition or distance from leftist regimes	Co-optation through social programs & access	Direct integration into government structures
Main Motivation	Defense of religious freedom & moral values	Access to power + spiritual warfare for nation	From marginalization to co-optation

The 2024 Venezuelan Presidential Election:

Reviewing the last 25 years of Venezuelan history in a few lines is not an easy task. A dramatic change in Venezuelan politics began with the election of Hugo Chávez Frías (HCF) as president in 1998. His first task was to change the Venezuelan Constitution of 1961, which became a reality with the approval of the Constitution of the República Bolivariana de Venezuela (RBV) in December 1999, based on the idea of creating a "participatory democracy" in the country. Under these new rules, HCF won huge electoral victories in 2000, 2006, and 2012, following an amendment that allowed for indefinite re-election. During his 12 years in power, HCF developed what he called "Socialismo del Siglo XXI" (21st Century Socialism, 21CS), which was seen as different from the 20th century communist regimes of the Soviet Union and Cuba. With immense revenues from oil exports, Venezuela became a laboratory for socialist experiments, but it ended up wasting billions of dollars and effectively turning Venezuela into a failed economy. In 2011, however, HCF was diagnosed with cancer, which led him to seek medical treatment in Cuba. He returned for the 2012 election campaign, and the effort physically undermined him to the point that in December of that year, before his last trip to Cuba for medical treatment, he named Vice President Nicolás Maduro Moros (NMM) as his possible successor. On 5 March 2013, HCF died in Caracas, leaving behind a controversial legacy and a divided country.

In April 2013, NMM was elected constitutional president of the RBV after a close election against Enrique Capriles Radonski, who had run against HCF in 2012. NMM's government was marked by controversy and growing opposition to the violent imposition of the 21st century. The massive and violent protests of 2014 and 2017 marked turning points for the migration of millions of Venezuelans around the world, especially within the region in Colombia, Perú, Ecuador, and Chile. In 2024, the estimated number of Venezuelan refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers reported by host countries reached 7.8 million, 84% of them in Latin America and the Caribbean. In the 2015 National Assembly (NA) elections, NMM

suffered a major setback, losing most of the seats in the new NA by a 2:1 margin. However, through legal and political maneuvering, NMM controlled the Tribunal Supremo de Justicia (TSJ), sidelined the 2015 NA, and later issued an executive order calling for the election of a new Constitutional Assembly (CA) in 2017 to amend the 1999 Constitution. The CA eventually overturned the decisions taken by the 2015 AN and ordered the National Electoral Council (CNE) to call for presidential elections in 2018, which NMM easily won due to a boycott by the opposition bloc. The second term of NMM was considered illegitimate by most political parties in Venezuela, leading to their banning and the disqualification of their main leaders from running in future elections. These actions led to diplomatic tensions and the imposition of economic sanctions by the United States and the European Union, even during the pandemic. As a result, the country entered its worst economic crisis in history, with a drastic drop in oil production, sky-high inflation rates, and 90% of the population below the poverty line [27].

In an attempt to recover from a failed shadow government led by the 2015 AN president, Juan Guaidó, who had been sworn in as interim Venezuelan president by the AN in January 2019, a large group of Venezuelans led by Maria Corina Machado (MCM) organized primary elections in October 2023 without the help of the National Electoral Council. With an unexpected turnout of 2.4 million votes, 90% of which were for MCM, a new opposition presidential candidate and leader was elected. After a series of failed negotiations, the government finally agreed to call a presidential election for 28 July 2024, in accordance with the Barbados Accord of 2023. In the meantime, MCM was disqualified from the race, and the opposition had to find a replacement in former ambassador Edmundo González Urrutia (EGU). Despite the government's questionable tactics, including the sponsorship of pro-government candidates, the short time allowed for the updating of the electoral registry, the shameless use of state resources for NMM's campaign, the intense political persecution of politicians and human rights activists, and the numerous obstacles placed in the way of a free and fair campaign by MCM and EGU, the elections were held peacefully on Sunday, 28 July.

Despite several exit polls showing a landslide victory for EGU over NMM, just before midnight on 28 July, Elvis Amoroso, president of the National Electoral Council (CNE), announced that NMM had won with 52% of the vote. On 29 July, an unexpected spontaneous protest began that led to several deaths and over 2000 arrests in the following week. Meanwhile, the MCM-EGU team had collected the printed tallies from 70% of the nation's polling stations and posted the results on an interactive website where any voter could check the results, showing an overwhelming 67% victory for EGU19. So far, the government has not been able to provide a detailed summary of the results, as required by the existing electoral regulations, which has led many countries to declare the official results fraudulent [28] and have begun to declare EGU as the elected president of Venezuela. However, NMM appealed to the TSJ to protect the results announced by the CNE and requested that the court recognize him as the legitimate president, which was granted on 22 August after a controversial and unclear process. The days that followed were filled with uncertainty for the opposition candidate and the political parties that supported him, including MCM, which had to go into hiding. In October 2024, the UN released a horrifying report that showed evidence of torture, killings, disappearances, and many other human rights violations in the aftermath of the election. At the time of writing, EGU is in exile in Spain, and MCM is still in hiding. The installation of NMM for a third term is expected to take place on 10 January 2025.

Table 3. Four Key Public Events Between Evangelicals and Maduro (2024)

Event Code	Date	Location / Format	Main Theological Elements Displayed	Political Purpose
V1 (ECP)	6-Mar-24	Puerto Cabello (open-air)	Prayer, Spiritual Warfare, Prophetic declarations	Launch social programs for pastors
V2 (ELFF)	15 May 2024	El Calvario Park (march/rally)	Family values, Cultural Dominion, Prophecy	Public show of support during campaign
V3 (ANR)	15-Jun-24	Miraflores Palace	Identificational Repentance, Spiritual Warfare	National cleansing & legitimization
V4 (ELCP)	16 August 2024	Miraflores Palace (post-election)	Prophecy, Spiritual Warfare, Dominion Theology	Consolidation of support after disputed results

Table 4. Theological Dimensions in the Four Maduro-Evangelical Events

Theological Dimension	Definition / Core Idea	Prominent in Which Events?	Key Example / Quote from Events
Prayer & Spiritual Warfare	Battling demonic strongholds through prayer & mapping	All four	"We bind death… every invasion" (V4)
Identification Repentance	Corporate repentance on behalf of the nation	V3 (ANR)	Maduro's public repentance at Miraflores
Prophecy	Progressive millennial declarations of national revival	V1, V2, V4	"Seven years of abundanc prepare to save" (V1)
Cultural Dominion (7MM)	Conquest of seven spheres of society (government, family, etc.)	V2, V3, V4	"Protector of the Venezuelan family" (V2)

Discourses of Venezuelan Evangelicals During the 2024 Presidential Elections: A Theological View:

Although NMM's government had already begun to reach out to evangelicals in 2018, the ruling party's strategy for the 2024 presidential elections deliberately intensified the relationship with apostles and pastors. What surprised many journalists, political scientists, religious scholars, and theologians was the fact that in a very short period of time (March to August), evangelicals were summoned four times by the Venezuelan President, two in public spaces and two in the privacy of the Miraflores Palace, all of which were covered live on national television and social media. It was decided to limit the research for this paper to these four events between the evangelicals and NMM, in which the President took ample time to be present and to engage in active participation and interaction with a constellation of evangelical leaders. The chronology of these events in relation to the election process is shown in Figure 2.

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The analysis of these public meetings was made possible by the extensive coverage of the events by state television (Venezolana de Televisión, VTV) and many other state news agencies. For the research, 4 h and 48 min of complete high-quality videos of the following events, available on YouTube, were used:

CP Video 1 (V1): Meeting with Christian Pastors (Encuentro con Pastores y Pastoras Cristianos) on 6 March 2024. A large open-air gathering of pastors and leaders in the city of Puerto Cabello to follow up on some of the social programs for leaders and churches offered by NMM's administration that began in 2023. Supposedly, there were 17,000 leaders and pastors, but the pictures show a smaller crowd. The number of participants, which was constantly repeated during the national television broadcast, was based on the number of beneficiaries of the "Buen Pastor" bonuses, one of the main social plans of NMM for evangelical pastors.

ELFF Video 2 (V2): Gathering for Life, Family and Faith (Encuentro por la Vida, Familia y FE), which took place on 15 May 2024. A well-attended march in a park near the Miraflores Palace (El Calvario) was organized by evangelical leaders. There was a large crowd that came from different churches in the metropolitan area of Caracas. It was a lively event with music and prayer, and a festive atmosphere.

ANR Video 3 (V3): Act of National Repentance and Enthronement of Christ in Venezuela (Acto de Arrepentimiento Nacional y Entronamiento de Jesucristo en Venezuela) on 15 June 2024. This meeting was held at the Miraflores Palace 43 days before the election. The setting was formal. In a brief ceremony before the main event, the apostolic leaders anointed NMM and prayed over him.

ELCP Video 4 (V4): Meeting with Christian Leaders for the Construction of Peace in Venezuela (Encuentro con Líderes y Lideresas Cristianos en el marco de la Construcción de la Paz en Venezuela), 16 August 2024. This event was broadcast from Miraflores Palace two weeks after the controversial election and proclamation of NMM as president by the Electoral Council. The meeting was set up as an informal home meeting with NMM and his wife, Cilia, sitting in the middle of a living room surrounded by evangelical leaders and apostles.

After watching the videos several times, as well as reviewing the numerous clips and shorter versions in social media, and the press releases about the events, AI-generated transcriptions of the totality of the videos in Spanish were obtained using the Video Highlight tool (https://videohighlight.com/ (accessed on 17 January 2025)), which also provided an AI-generated summary and outline of the key points in the video. A review of the transcriptions was carried out to determine their quality by reading through the transcripts while watching the videos. During the analysis, only those fragments that were to be used for this paper were translated into English by the author. Several other videos that serve as supporting material were processed in a similar way, but they were not considered central to this analysis, since the main point of interest was the interaction of evangelicals with NMM in the months leading up to the election.

There are several interesting aspects surrounding the events under analysis that will be briefly discussed, for example, the fact that the meetings resemble classical neo-Pentecostal or neo-Apostolic services, with contemporary musical worship at the beginning, Bible reading, preaching, prayer, prophecy, testimonies, announcements, greetings, a festive environment, and so on. This is a reminder that evangelical churches in Latin America have developed a Pentecostalized culture that is present in every aspect of their life. The use of the title "apostle" instead of "pastor" or "reverend" for the main leaders present is also interesting and reveals the immense influence of the apostolic movement in the leadership participating in these events. This was also confirmed in the ECP (V1), where apostle Dan Suárez, president of the so-called National Roundtable of Evangelical Pastors (MMN), which brings together the presidents of the local CPGs, gave the president a long list of 2024 evangelical activities. This list of events, supported by the MMN, included the visits to Venezuela of Florida (USA) megachurch pastor Guillermo Maldonado, a well-known NAR apostle, who was to hold a crusade in the new Caracas Metropolitan Stadium, and the crusades of Dr. Paul Enanche, apostle of the Dunamis Gospel International Centre, Abuja (Nigeria), who was to lead an

"Apostolic Invasion to Venezuela" event. Suárez was also speaking on behalf of MOVIUC, which organizes a major one-day prayer event every year, which in 2023 was attended by over 25,000 prayer warriors. MOVIUC is a Venezuelan network that promotes the dominion theology doctrine of the Seven Mountain Mandate (7MM), which is a feature of the global New Apostolic Reformation (NAR) movement [29].

Given the obvious influence of the apostolic movement in the four events described above, the analysis of the discourses will focus on the identification and description of four theological dimensions that are dominant in the contemporary apostolic movement. These dimensions are Prayer and Spiritual Warfare (PSW), Identificational Repentance (IR), Prophecy (P), and Cultural Dominion (CD), the definitions of which are given below. The choice of these dimensions is based on a careful observation of the structural elements that have contributed to the development of a new evangelical ecclesiology in the 21st century, especially the extraordinary involvement of apostolic churches in politics as reported in many different countries around the world. More specifically, the dimensions are related to the emergence and consolidation of the spiritual warfare movement the prophetic movement, the apostolic movement, and the doctrine of the Seven Mountains Mandate. The selected dimensions are present in one way or another in all four events, so the first step is to identify them in each of the four transcriptions. Relevant passages were extracted, classified according to the corresponding dimension, and their content was analyzed, and the fragments presented in this paper were translated. Let us go through some of the findings in each of the proposed dimensions of analysis.

Prayer and Spiritual Warfare (PSW):

Prayer is a discipline that is taught to Christians from the beginning of their spiritual life at conversion. Typically, it should follow the pattern of Jesus' prayer in the Gospels. However, there are all kinds of prayer models and styles that are part of the history of the church. Prayer is also practiced when interceding for other people who are not believers so that they may hear, believe, and be converted to Jesus. In the 1980s, however, several missiologists pointed out the difficulties of reaching certain people groups because of what they called "spiritual strongholds" controlled by demonic forces. Thus, a new type of prayer was developed, called "spiritual warfare prayer". In a short time, the Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal churches passionately embraced the spiritual warfare movement and began to map cities and regions to identify these spiritual strongholds that were working against the preaching of the gospel and the advancement of the kingdom. The movement expanded worldwide and contributed to the spread of the apostolic movement. With the recent involvement of the Neo-Pentecostal and Neo-Apostolic churches in politics, spiritual warfare prayer events have been promoted to cleanse the regions of those demonic agents, identified through spiritual mapping, who are preventing the expansion of the kingdom of God through Bible-based laws and initiatives in those communities.

During the ECP (V1), six pastors and apostles prayed for NMM's government. However, it was Ronaldo Santos (@ronaldo.santos.oficial), Bishop of the Venezuelan branch of the Pentecostal Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus (IURD), who led an SW prayer asking for God's help to destroy all the commercial blockades, embargoes, and sanctions that Venezuela is facing. In Santos' prayer, this spiritual battle took on a physical dimension, affecting the financial health of the country, which the bishop said was God's will. But the principalities and powers, represented on earth by imperialist governments such as the U.S. and the European Union, were preventing God's blessings from pouring down on the country:

Bishop Ronald Santos (V1): Lord, my God and my Father, in this moment, as we raise our hands for Venezuela, we cry out to you. Because we may have sanctions, blockades from all over the world, but the heavens are open over this nation, over this country. So, Father, I ask

you to remove the embargoes and the sanctions. Everything that has prevented this country from getting back on its feet, from moving forward.

No doubt the metaphor of spiritual warfare had taken hold, not only among evangelical leaders, but also among government officials20. At the ELCP (V4), which took place after the elections, NMM defined his electoral campaign and his government as epic because, in essence, "we are fighting a spiritual battle between good and evil" (V4). He referred to the physical dimension of this struggle saying that, in the days when the opposition rejected the published results and declared them false, "there were those who sought out young people, almost children, to burn and kill...we saw these acts of violence in which very young people...went out to burn...and they went around the world saying that this was a protest...". This was the context of that meeting, a conflict that was escalating, with several people killed and about 2000 people already in prison, many of them teenagers. For this reason, the organizers of the meeting felt it was important to open with a prayer to the Holy Spirit, led by apostle Isabel Fernandez, president of the National Network of Women in Authority and Government. Angels were called by the apostle to stop the demonic hosts that were influencing these protests and facilitating an invasion of the nation by a mercenary army, even threatening to kill NMM, as was rumored in those post-election days:

We are releasing angels from all four corners. Warrior angels to fight for our nation, to fight every day in the mighty name of Jesus. And we bind death, we bind demons, we bind every spirit that wants to come, every invasion, and we cast them out in the name of Jesus.

Identificational Repentance (IR):

The concept of "identificational repentance" (IR) was introduced in the 1980s and 1990s by the spiritual warfare movement, which was the seed of the 21st century apostolic movement [30]. In the practice of Identificational Repentance, the person praying acts as a substitute, asking forgiveness for the corporate sins of a nation, people group, or geographical area. During the prayer, the person acting as a substitute identifies himself or herself with the sins of that nation or people group, lists those sins, and then asks God for forgiveness. The spiritual practice is expected to bring healing to the nation by opening the doors for social, political, and economic progress.

In the context of spiritual mapping, the ANR event held at the Miraflores Presidential Palace would have been very important if it had been determined that territorial spirits inhabited the place where the prayer of repentance was to be spoken. For this reason, apostle Enrique Villalba (@pastorenriquevillalba), leader of the Comunidad Cristiana Cuadrangular de Cumaná, emphasized the importance of the location and the spiritual implications of the presence of the President at the event, expressing his gratitude that "the President… allowed us to set foot here" (V3). He then took the Venezuelan flag and, on his knees, began to pray spontaneously. At some point, his IR prayer left politeness and protocol and went to an unexpected place:

Apostle Enrique Villalba (V3): Forgive us, Lord. Forgive us for turning our backs on you. Forgive us for following other gods. Forgive us for worshipping gods that were not you. Forgive us for our sin, our immorality, our corruption. Forgive our faults, Lord. Forgive our pride.... Forgive our hard, proud hearts. Forgive all witchcraft. Lord, forgive our immorality, forgive everything we have done that has offended You, that has grieved You. Forgive every foolish word. Forgive every bad attitude, every selfishness. Have mercy. Today, we cry out to you and say, have mercy on us. We confess and acknowledge our sins; we turn to you.

Idolatry, immorality, corruption, pride, witchcraft, selfishness, slander, meanness, and offensive language are among the sins listed for repentance. They sound too general for those unfamiliar with Venezuelan politics, but for evangelicals, they describe the sins of the elites who have been in power, including the socialist regime. In particular, repentance from all "witchcraft", "pride", and "foolish words" is a reminder of the sins that have cursed the

nation, such as the alleged use of the Miraflores Palace for pagan rituals, and especially the cursing of Israel by the late President HCF. After that, NMM, visibly moved by the prayers, read a statement in which he asked for forgiveness in the following terms:

President NMM (V3): Lord, we repent of our sins. We ask forgiveness for the sins of our nation. As the authority of this country, I ask for your forgiveness on behalf of my government and my people for the sins of pride, greed, lust, anger, gluttony, laziness, and all the sins we may have committed as a nation. Forgive us. Heal our land. At the Miraflores Presidential Palace in Caracas, today, 15 June 2024, as President of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, I freely surrender my nation to Christ, so that He may be the absolute owner of this land. So be it.

Although the prayer began with what seems to be a textbook list of capital sins, without any personal confession of NMM's own mistakes as ruler, which include human rights violations, nepotism, and widespread corruption, some of which are still under investigation by the International Criminal Court (ICC), the most important part for evangelicals was when the president committed the nation's destiny to Christ. In fact, they will soon remind him of this promise, as apostle Isabel Fernández did in the post-election ELCP meeting (V4). She first compared NMM to David, who was a man "after God's own heart", and then added, "You gave this nation to God... it was so beautiful how you made that declaration when you gave this nation to the Lord. And the Lord has fought and will continue to fight for Venezuela".

Prophecy (P):

The gift of prophecy was one of the main practices of Pentecostal spirituality. In the 1980s, however, the emergence of the prophetic office became part of the emerging apostolic movement in which apostles and prophets played a prominent role. Early Pentecostal churches were deeply involved in apocalyptic prophecy, interpreting biblical passages and real-life contexts from a premillennial hermeneutic that emphasized the expectation of the rapture of the church and the end of times. Beginning in the 1990s, however, this dark prophetic tone, which gave rise to countless predictions and conspiracy theories, began to gradually change in the Neo-Pentecostal and Neo-Apostolic churches, and much more rapidly in the 21st century. The term "progressive millennialism" has been used to describe this radical change in prophecy [31]. Progressive millennialism is optimistic and full of hope that the kingdom of God can be established on earth before the second coming of Christ [32]. The prophets see the possibility of a restoration of all things that could facilitate the return of Christ, emphasizing, through a creative perception of reality and social contexts, not only repentance, conversion, and sanctification, but also the restoration of dominion over various essential areas of society. This approach has made contemporary prophets more daring in prophesying to leaders, government officials, and rulers from all over the world, creating a prophetic movement that can influence political objectives such as winning votes.

Prophecy in the events under study follows the pattern that characterized the office of the prophet in the apostolic churches. Spiritual revival of the nation is consistently prophesied, but this is a consequence of the growth of the church and the openness of the government to the church (a revival in politics). As a result, God will grant the blessings of economic growth, prosperity, restoration of moral values, abundance, and more, in front of the nations that have opposed, conspired, and blackmailed Venezuela. In the following prophecies, the prophets echo the rhetoric of the regime, which constantly blames the U.S., the European Union, and some Latin American leaders for the years of economic destruction that have led to the largest migration in the region's history. Despite all this, the apostle and prophet Dan Suárez (@apostoldansuarez) of the Ministerio Casa Global de Destinos and a member of the Renacer Apostolic Network, predicts seven years of abundance in which NMM must act as a new Joseph in Egypt, wisely managing the God-given resources:

Apostle Dan Suárez (V1): The world can say whatever it wants. They have conspired against Venezuela, but their counsel has not prospered. Here, God's counsel has prospered. 2024 is the first year of Venezuela's great economic upsurge until 2030, and even a little beyond, we will have times of abundance. Let us prepare to save, let us prepare to strengthen the economy of the nation, and I know that God will help you in this (speaking to NMM).

The same type of prophecy is found in the following event, spoken on national television in the midst of an intense election campaign. According to prophet Carlos Lombana (@apostolcarloslombana) of the Centro Cristiano para la Familia Vargas, the country will rise and shine because of the NMM government's return to God and traditional family values:

Apostle Lombana (V2): Despite the valleys of shadow and death that our nation has gone through, our nation is greening up, even better than before. Our nation will shine. Venezuela will rise, and it will rise with morals and with values. It will rise, not by paying or selling out to anyone, but by understanding that we do not owe anything to any lobby, to any entity, or to any other country, but that Venezuela is awakening... I want to tell you what is going to happen in this nation: If what we have seen so far has been an uprising, what is coming will not be comparable to what we have seen until now. Venezuela will be restored; do you know why? Because we are restoring and working for the greatest thing that exists, which is the family.

Even NMM seemed to receive the gift of prophecy when he was anointed by the apostles and pastors during the ANR (V3) when he said, "Our country will astonish the world with its strength and become the spiritual center of the world that is being born, I decree it today, 15 June 2024, you will remember it". It is difficult to measure the impact of these prophecies among evangelicals, because not all groups value this practice in the same way, and some even reject it. However, they were certainly politically useful for Maduro, who used the prophets' words at a campaign rally, and the moment went viral on TikTok.

Cultural Dominion (CD):

Several theologies converge within the apostolic movement. Two of these have been fundamental to the development of the Neo-Pentecostal churches: prosperity theology and the doctrine of the transfer of wealth. For the apostolic movement, however, the shift to a post-millennial eschatology has led to the development of a kind of dominion theology, in which Christians have a mission to re-establish God's dominion over entire nations and in every aspect of society and human expression. A pragmatic way of implementing this project, called the Seven Mountains Mandate (7MM) doctrine, has gained popularity among the Neo-Apostolic churches. In formulating this doctrine, the church must metaphorically conquer seven mountains representing seven spheres of society: family, education, government, business, arts and entertainment, religion, and media. Conquering the family mountain requires efforts to protect traditional family values, reject gender equality and abortion, and limit LGBTQ+ rights. In education, conquest requires the reintroduction of Bible-centered Christian values into school and university systems. Crowning the governmental mountain begins with the election of officials who support biblically inspired regulations and standards. In the case of business and economics, Christians must engage in entrepreneurship, business development, and productivity initiatives. Influencing the arts and entertainment industry involves harnessing creativity and talent to produce works that promote Christian values. Controlling the religious sphere is related to fulfilling the mandate of Matthew 28: to make Christian every nation and people group in the world. Domination of the media sector is possible by controlling all information channels so that they operate with honesty and are based on Christian truth. In other words, the 7MM requires very active and involved evangelical churches, not only spiritually through prayer and evangelism, but also socially, economically, and politically.

Many of the apostles, prophets, and pastors attending the events being analyzed have been exposed to the teachings of the 7MM and have participated in workshops and summits

on the subject over the past 15 years. In fact, one of the speakers at the ELFF (V2), apostle Carlos Lombana, has led workshops on taking the mountain of government in the 7MM summits convened by the MOVIUC network. In the summit in the state of La Guaira, he explained that this mountain is controlled by a spirit that "represents fear, uncleanness, and laws that are against God, which is why the church keeps away from this mountain, leaving this sphere of influence empty so that Satan can continue to control it". These summits, which are held throughout Venezuela, not only have classic preacher-centered sessions, but organizers also facilitate workshops and focus groups among regional apostles, pastors, and leaders who discuss the Seven Mountains in detail in their contexts and make plans to conquer them in each location.

For evangelicals, the growing number of elected evangelicals is a sign that the mountain of government is being conquered. But having direct access to other non-Christian key officials, as well as becoming spiritual advisors to executives of state-owned companies, is also fundamental in the process of conquest. At the ECP, there were the governors of the states of Carabobo and Aragua, the deputy governor for the capital district, the mayor of La Guaira, the country's most important port city, and other mayors from nearby cities. But to have direct access to NMM and to have him proclaim Jesus as Lord of Venezuela from the Miraflores Palace was certainly a great step forward in fulfilling the 7MM.

Further progress was made when NMM entrusted the evangelical church with the coordination of a large-scale national project (a mission, in the language of the government) on social equality and justice. Such a challenge, at least for a part of the evangelical church, means not only access to financial resources, but also connections with governmental offices at the local and national levels, which means new ways to conquer the mountain of government. In the words of NMM,

NMM (V1): I want the pastors, churches, and people of Christ to embrace the great mission of equality and justice, to make it their own, to go to the humble, to give shelter to those who have none, to give food to those who need it, to embrace the youth and get them off drugs, to bring the salvation of Christ to the humble people you love and serve.

But there are two other mountains to conquer: the mountain of family values and the mountain of education. Following the 7MM agenda, evangelical leaders at the ELFF (V2) proclaimed NMM as the "protector of the Venezuelan family according to the principles of the Word of God," and he vowed to protect the "original design of the family". This designation of "protector" is somewhat contradictory, since the presidential couple, both divorced and remarried, does not represent a family in the traditional sense. Despite this detail, they were celebrating the fulfillment of a prophetic word, as one of the speakers explained:

Apostle Lombana (V2): A prophetic word said that God is raising a revival in politics... the fact that you are here today, as the main defender of the Venezuelan family, speaks of what God is doing to bring revival to this nation.

Later in the same event, pastor Yosaphat Barazarte (@Yosaphatbarazarte), a lawyer and former NUVIPA candidate for the National Assembly, read a declaration in defense of traditional family values and of marriage between a man and a woman. She also proposed, on behalf of the evangelical church, other actions in the field of education, such as the creation of a University of the Family, "led by men and women with solid marriages, with their children in subjection". In addition, she asked the President to have access to the Ministry of Education to intervene in the study and reformulation of certain curricula that introduce sexual content contrary to biblical teachings and the "original design" of the family:

Pastor Barazarte (V2): The Church of Jesus Christ is concerned... about a kind of comprehensive sexual education that has permeated... the educational system of our children... For this reason, we ask that competent authorities investigate the content of those school texts that explicitly promote sexual education... Likewise, we ask for your authorization to join the

Ministry of Education to promote and adopt the teaching of a school subject on family principles and values, in which the roles, and the ethical, moral, and spiritual values are taught.

Despite the passion with which Pastor Barazarte presented the petition for the protection of the original design of the family by NMM's government, it is well known that among the leftist governments in Latin America in the last 25 years, the least progressive regarding the decriminalization of abortion and the rights of sexual orientation and gender identity was the 21CS implemented by the combined governments of the HCF and NMM. Human rights activist Victor Molina has shown in a recent article that the influence of the evangelical churches on the socialist regime has been fundamental in delaying the discussion and, even more so, the proposal of legislation on these issues:

The close relations between "chavismo" and the evangelical Christian churches, including the participation of members of the Pentecostal church as representatives of the National Assembly and as high-ranking judges, played a significant role in hindering the development of sexual orientation and gender identity rights, and girls, women, and birthing people's right to decide. Unlike institutionalized partisan-left governments and movement-left governments, such as Uruguay and Chile, populist-left governments, such as Venezuela and Nicaragua, did not perceive feminists and diversity movements as potentially valuable allies. Moreover, leaders in Venezuela and Nicaragua prioritized their relations with Catholic or Evangelical religious leaders. Hence, they continued to promote traditional gender roles and heteronormativity and rejected or reversed abortion decriminalization.

Discussion and Conclusions:

This article has shown that the process of minoritization of Venezuelan evangelicals began in the early 1980s with a political struggle for their faith, symbolized by the defense of the NTM. Soon after, there were several attempts to participate in partisan politics, with meager results, revealing the hard truth that "hermano no vota por hermano". However, their rapid numerical growth created a critical mass that the government could no longer ignore, especially since many of its own functionaries and top officials were part of this emerging group. Gradually, the evangelicals gained public notoriety and the attention of the ruling party, the PSUV, which led to direct encounters and meetings with NMM and his team. At first glance, these meetings seemed to be an opportunity to present a rosary of demands and petitions, but they were also a sign of the will of these evangelicals to be considered as a serious political subject that could interact with politicians and propose projects and laws for the country. In addition, these Neo-Pentecostal apostles and leaders were learning a new post-millennial eschatology that gave them a new hermeneutic for reading and interpreting the Bible, concluding that the kingdom of God must be established on earth before the second coming of Christ. Therefore, political involvement was no longer a choice, but a mandate to dominate society.

In a short period of time, Venezuelan evangelicals moved from the political background to become active protagonists of NMM's second period, whose legitimacy was widely questioned nationally and internationally. However, despite all the benefits they received from the government, it has not yet been proven whether evangelicals ended up supporting NMM's presidential candidacy on 28 July 2024. Further research may be needed to clarify this aspect, as well as to follow up on the alliance between evangelicalism and socialism that is taking place in Venezuela. The events described in this article are unprecedented in Venezuelan political history. For the first time, a religious group that until recently was considered marginal has gained such prominence in a presidential campaign. In a sense, this large group of evangelicals can be considered "co-opted" by NMM's regime, using classification, where support for an autocratic regime is exchanged for the openness to the sacralization of society. The co-optation of Venezuelan evangelicals is occurring through formal and informal channels, as we have seen in this article, with considerable results in a

short period of time. Evangelicals have obtained from the NMM government financial grants for nearly 40,000 pastors (Bono del Buen Pastor), materials and equipment for thousands of churches (Mi Iglesia Bien Equipada), permits for local radio and television stations, promises to reduce the time required to register new churches, tax exemptions at the national and regional levels, the allocation of land for agricultural projects, the creation of Pastoral Councils of Government (CPG) at the local level, and a National Ministry Roundtable (MMN), responsibility for the implementation of a state-sponsored program for equality and justice, the proclamation of 18 January and May 15 as the days of the Evangelical Pastor and of the Family, respectively, a delay in the discussion and approval of pro-abortion and same-sex marriage laws, the use of government spaces for crusades and conferences, such as the Metropolitan Stadium in Caracas, access to the Miraflores Palace once a month to wage spiritual warfare and cleanse the country of curses, and the declaration of Jesus as Lord of Venezuela by the President NMM himself, among other promises in the pipeline, such as the creation of a national evangelical university.

Evangelical involvement in political campaigns is not new to Latin America. As one researcher has described it, "Evangelicals came to stay, stayed to grow, and grew to conquer". Examples have quickly multiplied, with notorious cases such as the Colombian referendum on the peace accords, when megachurches campaigned for a NO vote based on the existence of an underlying gender ideology in the accords; the spiritual warfare campaigns for the candidacy of Fabricio Alvarado for the presidency of Costa Rica, supported by well-known apostles such as Ronny Chaves; the prophetic war in Honduras during the 2021 presidential race; the inner circle of apostles who advised and influenced President Alejandro Giammattei in Guatemala in the campaign to approve the Law for the Protection of Life and the Institutionalization of the Family; or the extraordinary evangelical support for Jair Bolsonaro, including his attempt to block a peaceful transfer of power in Brazil [32]. Moreover, evangelicals also played an important role in some right-wing dictatorships in the second half of the 20th century, such as the case of Pinochet's Chile and the Ríos Montt regime in Guatemala. However, in all of the aforementioned cases where Neo-Pentecostal and Neo-Apostolic churches have played a prominent role in Latin American politics, the association has always been with right-wing governments or candidates, something which has led some scholars to consider this association as a "perfect marriage".

Contrary to the common idea of the association of evangelicals with right-wing political agendas which are socially very conservative and economically neocapitalist, the case of Venezuelan evangelicals' support for a left-wing political party and its political agenda, described in this article, becomes a very important starting point to consider the reasons for this alliance, in particular because these associations between leftist governments and evangelical groups are growing in the region, as recent examples of support to López Obrador in Mexico, and to Petro in Colombia have shown. Several possible questions can be derived from the case described in this article, which could be considered important to understand the reason for this mutual embrace between evangelicals and an autocratic socialist regime, such as the 21st century led by NMM. The first and most obvious reason could be an association with the socialist government's conservative positions on the legalization of abortion and same-sex marriage, and even with traditional family values and gender roles. As noted in the previous section, the conservative positions of the socialist regime on issues of gender and sexuality have been present in both the HCF's and NMM's governments, which has led to the support of evangelicals. A second aspect that characterizes the Venezuelan case is the importance that the socialist regime gave to evangelicals who came from the lower classes of society and who adopted the discourse of HCF and joined his party. In this process, evangelicals have infiltrated all levels of the government, including the military, and truly supported and participated in government programs. In this regard, it is important to note that

there is an adaptation of evangelical discourse to fit the rhetoric of the regime. Similarly, government officials have begun to use evangelical jargon more openly in their public speeches, even quoting the Bible21.

The final aspect of the association is a more theological one. It is not simply an attempt to get close to power, but an application of the dominion theology of Neo-Pentecostal and Neo-Apostolic churches within a socialist regime. As [32] put it, there is first the evangelicals' demand to be included as a "legitimate part of the pueblo-nación (people's nation)", and secondly, there is the intention to redefine the pueblo-nación as pueblo-evangélico (people's evangelical). The application of the 7MM demands the domination of all the seven spheres of society: family, education, government, business, arts and entertainment, religion, and media. Therefore, any political gain is a step forward toward this objective. Thus, political activism is justified, and that is why Venezuelan evangelicals are no longer waiting for a sudden rapture that will take them to heaven in the blink of an eye. They want to see the kingdom of God established in their country, and they are working hard to make it happen. They envision a new nation made up of families according to the original design that will produce and raise honest people who can fight corruption, run social programs efficiently, educate society with Christian values, write laws based on the Bible, and conquer and govern the seven mountains of influence in society, thus transforming Venezuela into a truly "socialist and Christian" nation.

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