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THE ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN VENEZUELA'S POLITICAL CULTURE¹

ABSTRACT The main role of parties in Venezuelan political culture has been historically interrupted by the “Andean hegemony” dictatorships (1899-1945) and “perezjimenismo” (1948-1958). With the return to democracy in 1958, parties resumed their role as key political actors, but it began to deteriorate in the early 1980's, having declined significantly during the current government of Lieutenant-Colonel Hugo Chávez Frías. In this paper, we analyze the history and prospects of partisan influence in Venezuelan political culture, with special emphasis on the second half of the twentieth century.

KEY WORDS Parties, political culture, “andean hegemony”, “perezjimenismo” democratic transition, “polyarchy”, “partyarchy”².

INTRODUCTION

Political parties have become leading actors in shaping the political culture of any nation when performing their functions as citizens' demands transmitters to public authority institutions, as jobs seekers inside governmental institutions through elections,

¹ This article was submitted for publication before the death of Hugo Chávez.

² Partyarchy: Neologism to designate the extreme role of political parties in a democratic system.

and as public officials' providers through their leaders and activists, as well as relevant actors in the process of political socialization. Culture that has been defined as the set of values, ethical norms, attitudes, beliefs and expectations shared by society members towards the political system and social context in which they co-exist.³

The characteristics of that relationship between a party and political culture vary, of course, according to the following factors: (1) the governmental regime type, (2) the party ideological structure and organization leadership, and (3) socio-cultural prevailing tendency among community members. However, regardless of these and other differences that may exist within societies, party organizations have been considered as crucial elements in determining their political cultures since the nineteenth century.⁴

THE ORIGIN OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN VENEZUELA

Studies on Venezuelan political parties, carried out from a historical perspective, have agreed to identify the Patriotic Society, rooted in the April 19th 1810 events, as the first party organization that emerged in the country.⁵ Its founding members were Simón Bolívar, Francisco de Miranda, Carlos Soublette, Miguel Peña, Vicente Salías, Francisco Espejo and Antonio Muñoz Tébar, among others, who soon became the central characters of the revolutionary process which led to the events of July 5th 1811, the Declaration of Independence project, the separation of Venezuela and Spain, and the establishment of a sovereign state.

Beyond these actions, as noted by the historian Guillermo Morón, the Republic of Venezuela actually began its life as an independent country in 1830, after having experienced a long and bloody war which ended the Spanish domination and the disappearance of "Gran Colombia Republic". The latter had been founded by the Angostura Congress in December 1819 as requested by Simón Bolívar, and it included the territories and populations which nowadays are Venezuela, Colombia, Panamá and Ecuador.⁶

In the following two decades from 1810 until 1830, some groups with opposing political orientations, centralist and federalist, and with different leadership identifications, Bolivarian, Paecistas and Santanderistas, were formed, together with the crucial appearance of the Separatist Party in 1826, which played a central role, four years later, to disintegrate the Gran Colombia Republic.⁷

³ M. Sodaro, *Política y Ciencia Política. Una Introducción*, Madrid 2006.

⁴ S. Bartolini, 'Partidos y sistemas de partidos' in G. Pasquino (ed.), *Manual de Ciencia Política*, Madrid 1996.

⁵ R. Díaz, *La Historia y sus Historias*, Caracas 1989; M. Magallanes, *Partidos Políticos Venezolanos*, Caracas 1959; D. Urbaneja, 'Partidos políticos siglo XX' in *Diccionario de Historia de Venezuela*, Tomo 3, Caracas 1997.

⁶ G. Morón, *Historia de Venezuela*, Caracas 2011, pp. 147-155.

⁷ M. Magallanes, 'Partidos políticos. Siglo XIX' in *Diccionario de Historia de Venezuela*, Tomo 3, p. 509.

ELECTIONS AND PARTIES AFTER THE GREAT COLOMBIA

In 1830, the President of Venezuela began to be elected through indirect elections, in which only the citizens who gathered certain personal and social status criteria were entitled to participate through parish assemblies (voting based on census) and would select the members of the provincial electoral colleges. These members chosen would constitute the National Electoral Body. This last entity was the one that determined who would be elected as President. According to a researcher's estimates, the population who participated in the elections for parish assemblies from 1830 to 1854 was nearly 10%, while voters in the provincial electoral colleges were an average of 0.02% of the population.⁸

During the aforementioned electoral period, presidents such as José Antonio Páez (1830), José María Vargas (1834), José Antonio Páez a second time (1838), Carlos Soublette (1842), José Tadeo Monagas (1846), José Gregorio Monagas (1850) and José Tadeo Monagas a second time (1854) were elected or re-elected. Among these seven elected presidents, only one (José María Vargas) came from the civilian sphere. This fact along with the total military candidates number: 7 military applicants out of 8 in 1830; 5 military candidates out of 8 in 1834; 4 out of 6 candidates in 1838; 2 out of 4 in 1842; 6 out of 9 in 1846; 2 out of 7 in 1850, and 1 of the 2 candidates in 1854, shows an obvious military supremacy in the political scenario of the time. The percentage of votes won by the military ranged from 99.7% in 1854 and 45.7% in 1834, which averaged 84.7% in the seven elections cited.⁹

Regarding political party organizations, it should be noted that the Conservative Party came up (1839) during José Antonio Páez second presidency. The main leaders of this political party had important positions during that government, while the Liberal Party (1840) founded by Tomás Lander, only counted on the publication and circulation of "El Venezolano" (*The Venezuelan*) an ideological geared newspaper directed by Antonio Leocadio Guzmán. In 1858, the Federal Party was founded; its goal was to have a federal system of government. However, this political party could only begin this government system after the Federal War, which started on February 1859 and lasted until April 1864, when it was ended by the Coche Treaty.

With the end of that revolt, described by some authors as "guerrilla warfare", as well as with the recognition of Juan Crisóstomo Falcón Federalist government in 1868, Antonio Guzmán Blanco projected his image as the main leader in the national political scene. That same year, he founded an organization called the Liberal Union, which became the Liberal Party of Venezuela and was later known as the Great Yellow Liberal Party. This party served as the basis in the diverse periods in which he was intermittently appointed as President between 1870 and 1887.

⁸ A. Navas, *Las Elecciones Presidenciales en Venezuela del Siglo XIX, 1830-1854*, Caracas 1993, pp. 110-114.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 147-148.

Another historically significant party organization was the Liberal Reconstruction Party, founded by General Joaquín Crespo after the triumph of the Legalist Revolution, led by him in 1892 to end Raimundo Andueza Palacios' aspirations to be president. In 1893, Crespo promulgated a new Constitution that established direct and secret voting procedures and extended from 2 to 4 years the governmental period. In the February 1894 elections, he won with 349,447 votes in his favor.¹⁰

In the following presidential election period (1898-1902), Crespo supported Ignacio Andrade's candidacy that was competing with José Manuel Hernández, nicknamed "El Mocho", the Nationalist Liberal Party candidate. With the support of this organization founded in 1897, and thanks to his experience gained in the U.S. during the presidential campaign of William McKinley and William Jennings Bryan, Hernández launched progressive electoral strategies, such as displaying posters with his photo, holding rallies in different parts of the country and the use of political slogans, which generated widespread popularity. The hypothetical winner, however, was Ignacio Andrade, with an overwhelming difference of 400,000 votes, a matter which generated fraud suspicion over the election results. Hernández rose in arms to fight back the injustice he felt he had been victim of.¹¹

ANDEAN HEGEMONY AND THE END OF WARLORD ISM (CAUDILLISMO)

With Hernandez's revolt in March 1898, together with other shocking events such as Joaquín Crespo's death a month later during a combat to defeat that uprising, and the revolution triumph led by Liberal Restorative Cipriano Castro in 1899, there would be not only the four-year presidential period interruption (1898-1902) of Ignacio Andrade, but also the "Andean hegemony" was established for over four decades.

Castro, who began his march to Caracas from Colombia on May 23rd, 1899, arrived to Venezuelan capital city on October 22nd, having received the presidential chair a day after from General Víctor Rodríguez, who was in charge since Ignacio Andrade's departure. His presidential period continued until November 24th, 1908 when he had to undergo surgery, travel to Germany and appoint General Juan Vicente Gómez in charge as interim President. The interim period, in fact, lasted for twenty seven years. Gómez, Castro's godfather and friend, who had accompanied him in the long Liberal Restorative Revolution path, exercised power in an authoritarian way until his death on December 17th, 1935. During his government, he also vetoed Castro's return to Venezuela, who died on December 5th, 1924 in Puerto Rico, where he had been living during some of his long exile.

¹⁰ J. Sanoja, *Historia Electoral de Venezuela 1810-1998*, Caracas 1998, p. 12.

¹¹ D. Bushnell, 'Elecciones. Siglo XIX' in *Diccionario de Historia de Venezuela*, Tomo 2, Caracas 1997, p. 203, 1997; J. Sanoja, *Historia Electoral...*, p. 15; R. Velásquez, 'El Mocho Hernández, precursor y modelo', *Horizonte. Revista de aerolínea Avensa*, 1988.

During the 35 years in which Cipriano Castro (1899-1908) and Juan Vicente Gómez (1908-1935) held the presidential and political powers, uprisings like the Liberating Revolution in 1903, conspiracies such as that of April, 1928 with young army officers and university students' participation, and invasions under the command of General Román Delgado Chalbaud on a vessel called "Falke" in August 1929, were confronted and defeated, all of which contributed to put an end to warlords struggles (*caudillismo*) marked Venezuelan history since 1830, and impulse freedom of speech for political dissidence.

This stabilization process through "harsh" or authoritarian power exercise was, moreover, masked or covered up by certain political legitimacy appearances, especially during Juan Vicente Gómez's presidency. Therefore, it is worth noting that once Castro set off his trip for medical reasons to Europe, and in a judgment verdict in accordance with its constitutional powers, the Federal Court decided to suspend his Presidential period, arguing that he had committed serious crimes, and was formally replaced in office by Vice President Juan Vicente Gómez.¹² Additionally, as noted by a renowned historian, during Gómez's administration, the Constitution was amended seven times in order to *adjust the constitutional line, i.e. the legal establishment and the law according to presidential circumstances*.¹³

This strategy of giving formal or legal legitimacy to authoritarian ruling was accompanied by political and social reasons as well as an ideological justification for the exercise of such power: the presence of a "necessary gendarme" capable of ending barbarism and *caudillo* leadership separation prevailing in Venezuela since independence, as it was noted by the leading intellectuals associated with positivist thought.¹⁴

POLITICAL TRANSITION WITH THE ANDEAN RULERS IN POWER

After being in power for twenty-seven years, Juan Vicente Gómez died on December 17th, 1935. During his nearly three decades in office, he ended warlordism, repressed opposing parties, avoided democratic elections and banned the operation of party organizations.¹⁵ Despite of all these, as noted before, he covered his authoritarianism with a comprehensive apparent legitimacy and promoted the cult of heroes, including his own person.¹⁶

After Gómez death, Eleazar López Contreras, Minister of War and Navy, was appointed to fill the void in the presidency and was later ratified by the Congress as the President of Venezuela who concluded the unfinished government term of former president. Parliament approved a few days later his election as Constitutional President

¹² T. Polanco, *Perspectiva Histórica de Venezuela*, Caracas 2010, p. 112.

¹³ G. Morón, *Historia de Venezuela*, Caracas 2003, p. 179.

¹⁴ A. Sosa, *Ensayos sobre el Pensamiento Político Positivista Venezolano*, Caracas 1985.

¹⁵ T. Polanco, *Perspectiva Histórica...*, p. 116.

¹⁶ J. Lara, *El Culto a los Héroes en El Nuevo Diario 1913-1935*, Caracas 2008.

for a seven year period 1936-1943. In a constitutional amendment proposed by López Contreras and approved on July 16th, 1936, the presidency period was reduced from seven to five years; therefore he handed in the post to his successor, General Isaías Medina Angarita, on May 5th, 1941.

Although López Contreras' presidential administration was marked by some protests and strikes that were suppressed and by some political leaders expelled from the country, it was also characterized for having started a transition to democracy, as it can be evidenced by the twenty one political party organizations that flourished, some of which had to remain underground, like the Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV), or failed in their attempt to be legalized because of their Marxist ideology, like the Venezuelan Democratic Party (VDP).¹⁷

During Medina Angarita's administration, four political parties were legalized, including "Acción Democrática" (AD) in September 1941, which subsequently became the largest party in the country, and "Partido Democrático Venezolano" (PDV) in September 1943, the latter linked directly with the image and administration of President Medina.

Despite of having continued the political liberalization process initiated by his predecessor, Medina could not conclude his presidency period because he was overthrown on October 18th, 1945 by a military uprising supported by the political party AD. This insurrection, which initially tried to be avoided by leaders of that political party, was accomplished after the presidential candidate chosen by Medina for the 1946 elections, Diógenes Escalante, suffered a mental illness which incapacitated him, and the President pretended to impose the nomination of his countryman Angel Biaggini without using the universal mechanism of direct and secret election.

Although, López Contreras and Medina Angarita did not assume during their presidencies all political reforms that would have led to the establishment of a liberal democratic system in Venezuela, the fact that they extended the effects of civil rights – which were very restricted during Castro and Gómez's administrations – should be recognized, this process has been considered as the liberalizing feature of democratic transitions.¹⁸

THE "ADECO TRIENNIUM" (1945-1948) AND THE ARRIVAL OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

On October 19th, 1945, a day after the coup against Medina Angarita's government, a Revolutionary Board was installed: it was composed of two army officers (Major

¹⁷ A. García, *Ocaso de la República Liberal Autocrática. 1935-1945. Estudio Introductorio*, Caracas 2010, pp. 19-30.

¹⁸ G. O'Donnell, P. Schmitter, L. Whitehead (comps.), *Transiciones desde un Gobierno Autoritario*, Barcelona 1994. Due to this some analysts have questioned that the governments of Castro, Gómez, López and Medina are called or included within the "Andean Hegemony". Just because they were born in the Andean Tachira State.

Carlos Delgado Chalbaud and Captain Mario Vargas), four AD leaders (Rómulo Betancourt, who presided it, Gonzalo Barrios, Luis Beltrán Prieto and Raúl Leoni) and an independent who was the link between the military and AD leaders (Edmundo Fernández).

The very same day an official statement was issued indicating that the board immediate objective was carrying out general elections, *by the universal, direct and secret voting system Venezuelans might elect their representatives, get the Constitution they long for and choose the next President*. Three days later, in a decree supported by *the imperative antipersonalism commitment that they had contracted with the Nation*, the Revolutionary Board members formalized their disablement as members to apply for being President Candidates, i.e., by choice they excluded themselves for their eventual application as candidates.

Before the presidential election, another one was held to elect the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) members, on October 27th, 1946, which was responsible for drafting a new constitution. Five nationwide organizations and eleven of regional scope participated in the event.

Among the first five, in addition to Democratic Action (AD), there were parties which would play a leading role in the second half of the twentieth century. The Committee of Independent Electoral Political Organization (COPEI), with Social Christian orientation founded in January 1946, was one of them. Democratic Republican Union (URD), founded on March 12th that year, would be another political party with a significant influence on the country's political future. The Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV), which had come out from underground, was legalized on October 9th, 1945, and was a participant in the nationwide list, along with the Socialist Party (PS).

The election results was overwhelmingly in favor of AD, which got 78.43% of valid votes, followed by COPEI with 13.22%, URD with 4.26%, PCV with 3.62% and the PS with 0.14%¹⁹. The Constitution was approved and promulgated on July 15th, 1947.

In the following election to choose the President, and the members of Congress, held on December 14th of that year, AD candidates were the successful winners again. In the presidential choice, the renowned intellectual and novelist Rómulo Gallegos, received 74.47% of votes, followed by Rafael Caldera COPEI, with 22.4%, and Gustavo Machado, PCV, with 3.12%. In parliamentary voting, the result was equally favorable to AD, which won 38 senators and 83 deputies, while COPEI with its regional ally Republican Federal Union (RFU) obtained 6 senators and 19 deputies, URD got 1 senator and 5 deputies, and PCV 3 deputies.²⁰

The last democratic election for the "Triennium" was held on May 9th 1948. AD, which had been the leading party in the country, received 70.09% of votes for muni-

¹⁹ B. Bunimov, 'Los votos y sus cuentas' in A. Baptista (coord.), *Venezuela Siglo XX. Visiones y Testimonios*, Tomo 3, Caracas 2000, p. 139.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

cial councils members, COPEI 21.1%, URD 3.9%, and PCV 3.4%. The democratic transition that had begun on November 24th 1945, came to an end, when a coup d'état led by the same military leaders with AD support who had acted three years before to take out President Medina Angarita, got the presidency.

THE “PEREZJIMENISMO” AND DEMOCRATIC REGRESSION

Although the period from November 24th, 1948 to January 23rd, 1958 is popularly known as “perezjimenismo” or “Pérez Jiménez dictatorship”, referring to Marcos Pérez Jiménez's image, it must be stated that he was not the only one to exercise the presidential role during those years, even though some analysts agree that, beyond the formalities or appearances, he was the real political power and government in the country.

The truth is that after Rómulo Gallegos was overthrown, there happened to be the establishment of Military Board Government. It was headed by Lieutenant Colonel Carlos Delgado Chalbaud and also composed by Lieutenant Colonels Marcos Pérez Jiménez and Luis Felipe Llovera Páez. Although the three of them were part of the Patriotic Military Union (UPM), the group that organized and executed the coup against Medina in 1945 and against Gallegos in 1948, there were personal rivalries among them that impeded them to agree over political and administrative orientations or criteria unification.²¹

Two years after assuming the presidency, Delgado Chalbaud was kidnapped and murdered by a group from Falcón state who had planned his removal from the presidency. To fill the void the lawyer and diplomat Germán Suárez Flamerich was appointed as Chairman of the Governmental Board, on November 27th, 1950, a post he should remain in until December 2nd, 1952, the military high command decided to grant provisional powers of the Board to Pérez Jiménez.

Two days before, on November 30th, the election of National Constitutional Assembly (ANC) members, who were responsible for drafting a new constitution, had taken place. URD, COPEI and the Independent Electoral Front (FEI), composed by Pérez Jiménez followers, and other minority parties' candidates attended event by. AD and the PCV, as they had been disabled, did not postulate their candidates, although it is presumed that many of these parties' supporters voted for AD and COPEI's tenets.

In any case, the disclosure of scrutiny, which initially provided a clear advantage for URD, was suspended by government order, which led to the resignation of 11 out of the 15 Supreme Electoral Council members. Days later, in that council Official Gazette, a notice was published in which 60 deputies were awarded to FEI, 29 to URD and 14 to COPEI. On December 17th, 1952, URD publicly denounced the notice

²¹ M. Magallanes, 'Asesinato de Carlos Delgado Chalbaud' in *Diccionario de Historia de Venezuela*, Tomo 2, p. 48.

dishonesty and guaranteed that its candidates had won 67 seats, COPEI 19 and the “pro-government groups” just 17. This statement also emphasized the alleged “plebiscitary character” of an election that had served to highlight the fact that *the majority of Venezuelan people repudiated the policy of the Governing Board*.²²

On April 11th 1953, this unconvincing CNA approved the new constitution, which stated among its provisional resolutions the authority that the CNA had to appoint the President and other senior public officials for the government next five years. On April 17th, Pérez Jiménez was unanimously appointed as the Republic Constitutional President from April 19th, 1953 to April 19, 1958.²³

On January 23rd, 1958, after months of protests, citizen mobilization, some political parties’ clandestine resistance actions, and discontent within the armed forces expressed by Colonel Hugo Trejo’s rebellion and the uprising of naval officers, Pérez Jiménez was forced to flee the country, which finished the “perezjimenismo” and began a new transition to a democratic system.

PACT-BASED DEMOCRACY OR “PUNTOFIJISMO”

With Pérez Jiménez’s departure from presidency, a provisional board was installed, headed by Rear Admiral Wolfgang Larrazábal, who assumed governmental functions. The parties and their leaders who were clandestine or in exile reappeared on the political scene and began a consultation and negotiation process in order to stabilize and intensify the recently restored democracy.

In order to achieve this goal, “national unity” was promoted for several months and efforts were made to nominate a single candidate for the upcoming presidential election. The achievement of the latter could not be attained; consequently, the idea of a single candidate was given up, instead a governability pact was decided. This pact was called “Punto Fijo” named after the residence in which it was signed on October 31st, 1958, by AD, COPEI and URD representatives. The document established the following compromises: (1) to defend constitutionality and the right to govern according to election results, (2) to integrate a national unity government, and (3) to endorse a common minimum program.²⁴

In December 7th, 1958 elections, Rómulo Betancourt was elected as President with 49.18% of votes, followed by Wolfgang Larrazábal with 34.61% and Rafael Caldera with 16.21%. On February 13th of the following year, Betancourt took possession of presidency and proceeded to appoint his cabinet; keeping the compromised established in the Punto Fijo pact, with three ministers from URD, two from AD, two belonging to COPEI and five independents. The state governments also followed the uni-

²² M. Briceño, *Pérez Jiménez Presidente. La Autoelección de un Déspota*, 30 de Noviembre de 1952, Caracas 1971, p. 185.

²³ R. Velásquez, *Confidencias Imaginarias de Juan Vicente Gómez*, Caracas 1980, p. 174.

²⁴ N. Suárez, *Punto Fijo y Otros Puntos. Los grandes acuerdos políticos de 1958*, Caracas 2006, p. 19.

ty principle, by appointing to such offices party representatives with votes majority in each of these regional entities.²⁵

During his presidential period, Betancourt had to face military uprisings, an assassination attempt that caused him severe injuries, and a guerrilla insurrection promoted and supported by Fidel Castro and by communist organizations worldwide. The coalition government, composed according to the Punto Fijo pact, broke down when URD decided not to be part of it anymore on November 16th, 1960, however COPEI remained until the end of the five year period.

In the next presidential election, held on December 1st, 1963, Raúl Leoni, one of AD's founding leaders, won with 32.81% of votes, followed by Rafael Caldera (20.19%), Jóvito Villalba (18.89%), Arturo Uslar Pietri (16.08%), Wolfgang Larrazábal (9.43%), AD dissident Raúl Ramos Giménez (2.29%) and Germán Borregales (0.32%).

Given the various attempts of destabilization that had occurred, Leoni proposed the creation of a collaboration government with members of all democratic parties. Following this approach, on November 4th, 1964 a new cabinet was installed, having representatives from URD and the National Democratic Front (FND) – a party led by Uslar Pietri – as well as members from AD and independents. This was known as the “Wide Base” agreement or pact. The FND left the coalition on March 14th, 1966 because it considered the governmental actions ineffective, in Uslar Pietri's words: *as a consequence of none shared or accepted actions by the three political parties*.²⁶

On December 1st, 1968, elections were held in order to choose the Congress President and its members for a new five-years period (1969-1974). With the victory of COPEI presidential candidate, Rafael Caldera, who got 29.13% of votes, the alternation of power under Article 3 of the 1961 Constitution became a reality. He was followed by Gonzalo Barrios from AD (28.24% votes); Miguel Ángel Burelli, supported among others by URD and NDF (22.22%); Luis Beltrán Prieto, the People's Electoral Movement candidate (MEP), a splitting of AD (19.34%); Alejandro Hernández, PSV candidate (0.73%); and Germán Borregales, National Action Movement (MAN) candidate (0.34%).

Although during his presidential period, Caldera did not constitute a coalition cabinet, he did promote from his second year of government a parliamentary agreement for the development and submission of project laws, for Congress directives appointment and for the official selection as Attorney General and Republic General Comptroller. The agreement was known as the “Institutional Pact”. At the end of his administration in 1974, he had achieved the “peace” goal, that meant, the guerrilla insurgency abandonment by the most subversive and radical lefties who had started it in the early sixties.

Concerning the proposal for political conciliation initiated with the Punto Fijo Pact, it is reasonable to say that it was a successful experiment. This is because, as it has been highlighted by Levine (1973), it did not only promote the rapprochement among

²⁵ R. Velásquez, *Confidencias Imaginarias...*, p. 231.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 316.

various country elites, but also because it served as a model of understanding or reconciliation for party organizations militants, who had lived tension and confrontation moments during the “Triennium” (1945-1948). Additionally, within this latent conflict environment, there were divisions or social fractures in the country which resulted in significant differences when voting in 1958 national elections. For example, while the poor sectors of the population tended to vote in a majority for AD candidates, the middle and upper classes tended to do so for COPEI candidates.²⁷

If these social divisions did not hinder the rapprochement and political understanding, despite having been expressed in party preferences and electoral opposite behaviors, it is sensible to think that the party organizations embodied then positive reference groups. Therefore, these political parties had achieved or fulfilled to a large extent their socializing agents function in an emerging democratic context challenged by subversive forces.

VOTE CONCENTRATION AND ATTENUATED BIPARTISANSHIP

December 9th, 1973 national elections attainment marked the beginning of a vote concentration process among AD and COPEI candidates, which remained over three subsequent elections and resulted in what Molina²⁸ has called “attenuated two-party system”. As shown in the table below, this trend broke down the relative electoral plurality of previous years (1958-1968).

TABLE 1. Combined AD and COPEI vote in national elections
Year (%)

	1958	1963	1968	1973	1978	1983	1988
Congress	65	54	50	75	79	79	75
Presidency	65	53	57	84	90	92	93

Source: Supreme Electoral Council (CSE) (Percentages have been rounded).

Different factors have been identified as probable background or generators of this trend towards bipartisan vote concentration between 1973 and 1988.²⁹ One of them, according to Molina (2004), was the successful organization and informative work AD and COPEI performed. As a consequence, they were identified with democracy. To which the author adds some economic stability during that period and the

²⁷ D. Myers, ‘Venezuela’s political party system. Defining events, reactions and the diluting of structural cleavages’, *Party Politics*, Vol. 4, Nº 4 (1998), pp. 495-521.

²⁸ J. Molina, ‘Partidos y sistemas de partidos en la evolución política venezolana’ in J.E. Molina, A. Alvarez (coords.), *Los Partidos Políticos Venezolanos en el Siglo XXI*, Caracas 2004.

²⁹ This voting pattern or tendency appeared without the proportional representation system modification (D’Hondt method). As a consequence, the so called “Duverger’s laws” did not get empirical support in Venezuela’s case.

development of major client networks that allowed them to go through and even control different civil society sectors.³⁰

Myers (1998), meanwhile, has stressed that the oil *boom* fiscal impact expedited the implementation and development of governmental programs, at the same time, structured patronage-client schemes and strengthened party leadership.³¹ The authors cited agree that during those years, organizations have tended to embody the kind of “catch-all” party, which blurs the ideological and highlights pragmatism.

According to citizens’ attitudes and opinion points of view, the fact that “economic vote” and “punishing vote” had an apparently significant incidence in such electoral trends. To this, Martz³² has pointed out that since 1973 the public was persuaded not to waste or lose their votes on secondary contenders.

Empirical evidence of this fact was collected in a post-election study by the polling firm “Datos” about the 1983 presidential election. When interviewed three months after the election, 39% of the members of a national sample said they had considered voting for a candidate different from the one who finally received their support. Sixty nine percent (69%) of those who changed their voting intentions had been initially inclined to vote for one of the leftist candidates (Teodoro Petkoff or José Vicente Rangel). Of these potential left-wing voters who deserted on Election Day, 35% admitted to have altered their original preference in order to avoid wasting their vote.³³

This economic voting phenomenon was accompanied in the 1973, 1978 and 1983 elections by the punishing voting one. The latter consisted in losing major votes in each of these elections for the ruling political party; this majority voting had been obtained five years before, when it was the main opposing party. This process repeated over as a new opposition cycle, due to public disenchantment with governmental management. Thus, in 1973 AD the main opposition party, won 48.7% of votes for presidential candidate Carlos Andrés Pérez, against 36.7% received by Lorenzo Fernández, COPEI candidate, current ruling party. In 1978, the main opposition candidate, Luis Herrera Campins from COPEI, won 46.64% of votes, while the ruling party (AD) candidate Luis Piñerúa got 43.31%. In 1983, AD candidate, Jaime Lusinchi won 56.72% of votes cast, well above the official candidate of COPEI, Rafael Caldera with 34.54%.

This tendency towards an electoral shift or punishing vote came to an end with 1988 presidential election, when former President Carlos Andrés Pérez, AD ruling party candidate, won 52.89% of votes over Eduardo Fernández, from COPEI, who got 40.4%. Pérez thus became the first president to be re-elected since democracy reopening in 1958, thanks to major population expectations to return to the “oil boom years” that they had experienced during Carlos Andrés Pérez’s first period (1974-1979).

³⁰ J. Molina, ‘Partidos y sistemas...’

³¹ D. Myers, ‘Venezuela’s political...’, p. 500.

³² J. Martz, ‘Political parties and the democratic crisis’ in L.W. Goodman et al. (eds.), *Lessons of the Venezuelan Experience*, Washington, DC 1995.

³³ A. Templeton, ‘Venezuelan elections 1983. Candidates still count’, Paper presented at World Association of Public Opinion Research (WAPOR), 1986.

CARLOS ANDRÉS PÉREZ'S UNFINISHED MANDATE AND THE END OF ATTENUATED BIPARTISANSHIP

Although Pérez selection for presidency on December 4th, 1988, broke the punishing vote trend against the ruling party candidate, but the phenomenon of economic voting persisted, this was evidenced in the sum of votes obtained by AD's presidential candidate and COPEI's Eduardo Fernández candidate, which was above 93% of the total counted. Additionally, it is important to emphasize that in that same year the abstention rate reached 18.08%, the highest figure of all elections held between 1958 and 1983, when it had fluctuated between 3.27% in 1968 and 12.45% in 1978.

Carlos Andrés Pérez second presidency faced serious difficulties and many challenges from its beginning that hindered to complete his presidential period in 1994. The first of these challenges was the social explosion which began on February 27th, 1989 and lasted for a few days, known as "Caracazo", when a protest against the public transport fares increase in Guarenas, a town nearby Caracas, quickly spread to major urban centers. The violent popular mobilization, originally directed against transport units also targeted small, medium and large commercial establishments, factories and shops, which were subjected to looting and some of those places were burned or destroyed.

Some other factors have been mentioned by different authors among the issues which generated the violence unleashed by the rise of transportation tariffs stated above. Those factors are the announcement and implementation of an economic adjustment program that clashed with the quick improvement in citizens' life quality expectations, which deteriorated during Jaime Lusinchi's administration (1984-1989). In addition to increasing gasoline and transportation fares, unpopular measures such as releasing products prices which were previously regulated by the government, and the gradual public service price increase (water, electricity, home gas and telephone), were part of that adjustment.³⁴

Apart from such factors' pressure, Carlos Andrés Pérez pointed out in an interview with two renowned journalists, that the social explosion main causes had been linked with Metropolitan Police insurrection that resulted, both, in an information blockade about what was happening in Caracas streets and in policemen's support and incentive to looters³⁵.

In order to control vandalism and violence exacerbated by police corps ineffectiveness, the government had to mobilize military contingents from outside Caracas. This provoked a crackdown on those involved in the unrest, which, according to various sources, left more than 300 deaths.

Besides the tragic impact produced on the victims' family and friends, this repression also had obvious political effects later on the rest of the population. The most

³⁴ M. Kornblith, 'Deuda y democracia en Venezuela: Los sucesos del 27 y 28 de febrero', *Cuadernos del CENDES*, Nº 10 (1989), pp. 17-34.

³⁵ R. Hernández, R. Giusti (eds.), *Carlos Andrés Pérez. Memorias Proscritas*, Caracas 2006, p. 335.

obvious of these was that the February 4, 1992 failed coup d'état actors used it as a justification for their rebellion. According to them, the military rebellion had supposedly been in response to the three year before armed force abuse of power in order to silence social unrest. In this respect, Hugo Chávez has repeatedly stated that without February 27th, 1989 (27-F) repression and February 4th, 1992 (4-F) uprisings would have not occurred.

This statement has no support because the coup led by Lt. Col. Chávez in 1992 had its roots in several military groups to which the Lt. Col. belonged since the end of the 70s, which had as objective to impulse a revolution and install an anti-oligarchic popular government. The same can be said about the higher hierarchy conspirators who tried, also unsuccessfully, to overthrow Carlos Andrés Pérez's government on November 27th, 1992, with an outcome of 171 dead mostly civilians.³⁶

Contrary to what some journalists and observers have argued in regard to both coups implementation and defeat, most of the population, according to surveys carried out by y"Datos", rejected these attempts to end in a violent manner Pérez's administration. Thus, in March 1992, a month after the first coup, only 12% of respondents preferred a military government to the current civilian government. Likewise, those who expressed in December support to the previous month bloody uprising reached 22% of the interviewed sample, compared to 76% who expressed their rejection and 2% who did not answer the question regarding the approval or rejection of that revolt.³⁷

The fact that a majority rejected a military solution did not mean, however, that the government had a broad popular support. From the very first year in office, after the "Caracazo" events, different surveys collected negative evaluations, not only about Pérez's performance, but also about government officials and political leaders in general. For example, in October 1989, "Mercanálisis", a public opinion research company, asked a national population sample the question *who could be considered corrupt in the country?* and found that 32% pointed out public administration officials as such and 29% selected various politicians.

Other studies conducted in April 1990, December 1990 and June 1991 found that when asked respondents whether national leaders were fighting corruption, 56% answered negatively in the first survey, 71% in that of December 1990 and 76% in June the following year.³⁸

Government corruption allegations became, in fact, the decisive factor in President Pérez's removal before ending his period. More specifically, in November 1992 two journalists, José Vicente Rangel and Andrés Galdo, publicly denounced an alleged se-

³⁶ D. Irwin, I. Micett, 'Logias militares venezolanas y conspiración, 1972-febrero 1992', *Argos*, Vol. 28, Nº 54 (2011), pp. 61-86; A. Aguiar, 'La última transición' in A. Aguiar et al. (eds.), *De la Revolución Restauradora a la Revolución Bolivariana. La Historia, los Ejes Dominantes, los Personajes*, Caracas 2009.

³⁷ A. Templeton, 'The evolution of popular opinion' in L.W. Goodman et al. (eds.), *Lessons of the Venezuelan...*

³⁸ N. Villasmil, *La Opinión Pública del Venezolano Actual. Febrero 1989-marzo 1994*, Caracas 2001.

cret money deviation from Internal Affairs Ministry's accounts, which had taken place in March 1989. In January 1993, Rangel formally presented the accusation before the Attorney General's Office (FGR), headed by Ramón Escovar Salom, who promptly requested the Supreme Court of Justice (CSJ) a preliminary merit hearing to the President for alleged misappropriation.

On May 20th, the Supreme Court stated that there were prosecution merits and possible removal of the President, a decision that was supported the next day by the Senate. Senator Octavio Lepage, AD activist and Congress president was temporarily appointed to occupy the position. Later, on June 5th, Ramón J. Velásquez was chosen by the congress members to conclude the constitutional period.³⁹

Before concluding this section, the authors consider important to point out, that AD's National Executive Committee decided to expel President Pérez from the political party on May 20th, 1994, i.e., one year after the Supreme Court decision. This put an end to differences and confrontations that political party leaders had had with him since ex-president Pérez had decided to integrate his cabinet, especially in the economic area, with highly qualified professionals and technicians, who were not active in that political party.⁴⁰

PARTIES' DEALIGNMENT⁴¹ AND RAFAEL CALDERA'S RE-ELECTION IN 1993

After being defeated by Eduardo Fernández in COPEI's 1988 presidential nomination, Rafael Caldera began to project himself as the eventual winning candidate of 1993 elections. As part of that strategy, he displayed an intense activism and made strong criticisms to the governmental team management.

Thus, on March 1st, 1989, during "Caracazo" violent events, he gave a speech to the Senate – to which he belonged as life-time senator for having been President of the Republic – in which he called the economical adjustment program adopted by the government the "economic package" and criticized the fact that it had given priority to economic over social problems. The impact of this speech broadcasted by media and in a widespread public fear context and uncertainty situation was apparently very favorable to his image and leadership.

Towards the end of the following year, he had another opportunity to criticize the government economic approach after the approval of the Labor Law by the Congress. This law had been drafted by a joint commission chaired by him and it was perceived as inconsistent with the labor liberalization implicit in the "economic package". In a for-

³⁹ L.J. Silva, *De Herrera Campíns a Chávez*, Caracas 2007, pp. 372-386.

⁴⁰ R. Hernández, R. Giusti (eds.), *Carlos Andrés Pérez...*, p. 330.

⁴¹ *Trend or process whereby a large portion of the electorate abandon its previous partisan affiliation, without developing a new one to replace it* ('Dealignment', *Wikipedia*, at <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/dealignment>).

mal speech, Caldera described as “unfair” the arguments made against the legal instrument issued by the government and the business sector.

But the occasion that definitely positioned Caldera as Pérez’s counterpart was that on February 4th, 1992, when he gave a speech in a Congress joint chambers session to establish a public position about the military uprising that began in the morning and was defeated on the same day. Faced with the prevailing confusion and uncertainty, Caldera diagnosed the country democracy deterioration causes, condemned the coup and, though, expressed, that *it was difficult to ask people to immolate for freedom and democracy when they thought freedom and democracy were not able to feed them and to prevent the excessive subsistence cost rise, when freedom and democracy had not been able to halt permanently the terrible morbid corruption, which in everyone eyes is consuming official institutions. This situation cannot be hidden.*

As it was mentioned, he adopted this leading role as a government opponent; Caldera began to emerge as the candidate with greater chance to replace Pérez as Venezuela’s President. However, COPEI, the party which he founded and in which he was a presidential candidate five times (1947, 1958, 1963, 1968 and 1983), decided to open primary elections to choose its candidate in April 1993. In these elections, in which Caldera chose not to participate, Oswaldo Alvarez Paz was elected with 64.04% of votes, followed by Eduardo Fernández (29.3%) and Humberto Calderón Berti (6.6%).

In response to this decision, COPEI’s National Committee decreed Caldera’s “self-expulsion” from the party on June 7th, 1993, to which he reacted by saying: *You can erase my name from the members’ books, but not from the heart of “Copeyanos” COPEI militants.* The former COPEI President attended December 5th election as the candidate of his ad hoc party, Convergencia (Convergence), and 14 other organizations, which included MAS, URD, MEP and PCV. At the end, Caldera was elected with 30.46% of votes, followed by Claudio Fermín from AD (23.6%), Oswaldo Alvarez Paz, COPEI (22.73%), Andrés Velásquez, Radical Cause candidate (LCR) (21.95%) and fourteen other candidates, none of which could reach even 1% of the counted votes. Abstention reached the highest level since 1958 with 39.84% of registered voters.

These results made evident not only the end of attenuated bipartisanship, but also a political party dealignment, i.e., the breaking of relatively stable loyalties expressed to political parties, through consistent electoral behavior of its members and supporters.

From the beginning, Caldera’s administration had to face severe problems, especially in the economic sphere, which had serious political outcomes. The first one was the banking crisis, which started almost at the end of Ramón J. Velásquez brief government and had led to Banco Latino’s intervention January 21st, 1994. In the following two years, fifteen other banks were intervened, which cost U.S. \$ 7,300 million to the government. This banking crisis brought with investment contraction and a significant capital outflow which affected the level of international reserves.⁴²

⁴² L. Silva, *De Herrera...*, pp. 465-466.

The decline in oil prices was another factor that affected the government's development which initially raised "anti-neoliberal" expectations among various population sectors, based on the frustration caused by the "economic package" application during Pérez's administration. Concretely, the petroleum barrel price fell down between 1994 and 1998 at its lowest level from the oil industry nationalization in 1976, having ranged between US\$9, 38 and 12, 41 in this period.⁴³

The decrease in fiscal revenues, together with the aforementioned crises, forced the government to apply an economic package in 1996, called "Agenda Venezuela", despite the repeated criticisms that Caldera had made to the regulation policies adopted during Pérez's second presidential period.

While the measures taken on the basis of that agenda had some positive effects, the economic situation that Venezuelans had to face during Caldera's second presidency was hard and frustrating. Thus, as shown in Table 2, inflation rates and unemployment remained high throughout his five years term in office.

TABLE 2. Accumulated annual inflation rates and unemployment
Year (%)

	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
Annual Inflation	70.8	56.6	103.0	37.6	29.9
Unemployment	8.5	10.2	12.4	10.6	11.0

Source: National Statistics Institute (INE).

In short, Rafael Caldera, having been promoted as the antithesis of Carlos Andrés Pérez, was re-elected for the Presidency of the Republic in 1993 as candidate of his new party, Convergence, and of several minor organizations. In the beginning, his levels of support turned out to be high, to the point those eight months after having been elected and being at the office post, he had 66% of popular approval.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the application of the economic adjustment included in "Agenda Venezuela", dramatically eroded this support, which opened the doors to Hugo Chávez Frías' victory in the 1998 presidential elections.

THE 1998 ELECTIONS AND HUGO CHÁVEZ ARRIVAL TO PRESIDENCY

Partisan misalignment which emerged in 1993 did not disappear for the next presidential elections held on December 6th, 1998. The separation of parliamentary elections

⁴³ D. González, 'Cómo el Estado empobreció a Petróleos de Venezuela' in *Cuando el Estado Empobrece a la Nación*, Caracas 2006, pp. 143-144.

⁴⁴ A. Romero, 'Rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. The agony of democracy in Venezuela,' *Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 32, Nº 1 (1997), pp. 7-36.

(November) from presidential elections (December), fluctuations in candidates nominations, and the parties polarization in two blocs were expressions or consequences of this phenomenon.⁴⁵

It should be noted, that by the end of 1997 – more than a year from the national elections – Irene Sáez Conde, Miss Venezuela and Miss Universe 1981, appeared in the voting intention polls as the probable winner and the first woman to lead the Venezuelan government. Her political career began in 1992 when she won the election for Chacao county Mayoralty in Caracas, having been re-elected in 1995 with 96% of votes.

Before formalizing her presidential candidacy, she decided to create a party called IRENE named after her name initial letters: Integración, Renovación, Nueva Esperanza (Integration, Renewal, New Hope). Democratic Factor, another small party organization, supported her candidacy, and also counted with COPEI's support. However, considering that during the first quarter of 1998 she had a high voting intention which significantly declined, as reflected by different public opinion surveys, the latter party decided to withdraw its support and offer it to Henrique Salas Römer, Carabobo state former governor who was nominated by his organization Proyecto Venezuela.

Meanwhile AD which had nominated Luis Alfaro Ucero as presidential candidate, also decided to support Salas Römer, the only candidate, according to public opinion researchers, that could defeat Hugo Chávez in the presidential pursuit.

Despite these candidate shifts by traditional parties, Chávez became, after all, the winner in December 6th elections, nominated by his party Movimiento V República (Fifth Republic Movement, MVR) as well as other organizations that made up the so-called "Patriotic Pole". According to election ballots, he won 56.2% of valid votes. Salas Römer received 39.97%; Irene Sáez 2.82%; and eight other candidates, including Alfaro Ucero, summed up together 1% of votes.

With Chávez's victory – a charismatic leader of a failed coup, who was freed of charges against him in 1994 by President Caldera – several elections were held which opened a new political scene in the country. The first of these consultations was an advisory referendum requesting a National Constituent Assembly (ANC) on April 25th, 1999. As this referendum was approved, 128 assembly members or constituents were elected on July 25th. This assembly drafted a new Constitution, which was subjected to an approval referendum on December 15th that same year. In all these events the option proposed by Chávez and his party won, amid a great abstinence rate that ranged between 54 and 62%.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ A national survey, carried out in October 1998 by the Red de Estudios Políticos (REDPOL), found that the traditional parents influence over their sons and daughters' party identification had significantly declined. This constitutes evidence in support of the dealignment process experienced in the country (V. Pereira, 'Problemas familiares de los partidos políticos: Cambios de rumbo en la realización política venezolana', *Cuadernos del CENDES*, N° 40 (1999), pp. 139-158).

⁴⁶ T. Maingón, 'Reconstitución política y desafíos de gobernabilidad en Venezuela', *Anuario Social y Político de América Latina y el Caribe*, N° 3 (2000), pp. 41-48.

Given that the approved constitutional text created new institutions, rules, political and administrative procedures, a simultaneous election processes that granted legitimacy to the different government levels were held for national, regional and local scenarios. In these elections, held on July 30th, 2000, and baptized as the “mega-elections”, Hugo Chávez defeated (59.8%) Francisco Arias Cárdenas (37.5%) in the presidential election. In the parliamentary election the governmental coalition (MVR-MAS) triumphed, obtaining 102 out of 165 deputies for the National Assembly, the same scenario applied for regional elections winning 15 out of 23 state governorships. At the local level, the coalition got 29% of municipalities, having won 98 out of 335, compared to 91 obtained by AD and 52 by COPEL.

Between July 30th, 2000 and December 3rd, 2006, when the new presidential election should take place, a presidential revocable referendum was announced which the opposition hoped to carry out in August 2003, was postponed until the following August by the National Electoral Council (CNE) with the allegation that there had been irregularities in the signatures’ collection required to activate this mechanism. This postponement allowed the President to come out victorious from the query, because, during those months, as he himself acknowledged, the so called “social missions” helped to restore his declining popularity with the help hand of Fidel Castro.

In December 3rd, 2006 election, Chávez got 62.8% of votes and Manuel Rosales 36.9%, Zulia state former governor, who was nominated by the main opposition parties. The twelve remaining candidates accounted for 0.25% of total valid votes. This time, abstention diminished significantly compared to that of the “mega-elections”, reaching 25.3% of registered voters.

Two weeks after his re-election, Chávez publicly called his allies, followers and supporters to form a unitary party, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela, PSUV), which would replace the MVR and would incorporate other political parties that had supported him in the past and were willing to merge in that political idea. Otherwise, their leaders and activists should abandon their positions in the government.

While some organizations such as Patria Para Todos (PPT), Por la Democracia Social (PODEMOS) and PCV rejected merging, the project went ahead and registered at about 5.7 million members between April and June 2007. In January 2008, a founding congress led on March 14th made possible PSUV’s formalization as a nationwide party.⁴⁷

Chávez threatening “invitation” to his political allies to join the PSUV came to represent further evidence of what had already emerged as a personalized government with hegemonic pretensions, which has been his main feature over the last thirteen years. In Ramos Jiménez’s words, Venezuela has established a regime characterized by the charismatic and plebiscitary leadership imposition, by the dismantling of bipartisan democracy, and by institutional and electoral authoritarianism, that has influen other

⁴⁷ PSUV, ‘Somos un faro para América Latina y el Mundo’, at <<http://www.psuv.org.ve/psuv/>>, 15 June 2013.

countries in the region.⁴⁸ This political process, which aims at “21st century Socialism” establishment, has been sustainable until now because of high oil income in recent years and the discretion with which the government has been able to manage those resources.

A RETROSPECTIVE VIEW OF PARTIES AND POLITICAL CULTURE IN VENEZUELA DURING THE 19TH CENTURY

As noted at the beginning of this article, with the end of Gran Colombia Republic in 1830, a process of indirect elections to choose the Nation's President was started in Venezuela. With the exception of José María Vargas, a surgeon and university professor, elected for the 1834-1838 period, all the other presidents elected and re-elected until 1854 came from the military and mostly competed with other candidates from the same sector.

Beyond this militarization of politics, it must be mentioned that party organizations were also created with the intention of attracting the civilian population support to its leaders and government projects. Thus, in 1839, General José Antonio Páez founded the Conservative Party, while the civilian journalist Tomás Lander founded the Liberal Party the following year. In 1858, the Federal Party was founded; this party was the origin of the federal war that devastated the country until 1864.

After the conflagration was finished, Antonio Guzmán Blanco, a lawyer who was that war military commander, founded the Liberal Union in 1868, which led to the Venezuelan Liberal Party, known afterwards as the Great Liberal Yellow Party (Gran Partido Liberal Amarillo). Regardless of its name, as it has been stated by the historian and former interim President Ramón J. Velásquez, since the Liberal Party creation by Tomás Lander in 1840 and until the early twentieth century, these organizations had liberalism as their only orientation. This guidance, which was beyond the party organizational aspect, constituted a reflection of the prevailing political culture in the country. In Velásquez's words, *There is a rudimentary organization that had reached the last village, but more than organizational machinery to speak in twentieth century terms, liberalism is a democratic attitude, a key that concentrates deep feelings of justice for all.*⁴⁹

In synthesis, though during the analyzed period political parties were created with clear selfish and praetorian characteristics, the same ones helped to generate and reinforce cultural orientations as the aspiration and search of the equality and the social recognition.

⁴⁸ An example of power abuse during election campaigns was presented in a study about the 2007 and 2009 constitutional referenda. In both cases, impunity prevailed (V. Pereira, C. Pérez, 'Venezuela: The impact of recent electoral processes' in D. Levine, J.E. Molina (eds.), *The Quality of Democracy in Latin America*, Boulder, Colorado 2011). A. Ramos, *El Experimento Bolivariano*, Mérida 2009, pp. 23-24.

⁴⁹ R. Velásquez, *Confidencias Imaginarias...*, p. 17.

THE EVOLUTION OF PARTIES AND POLITICAL CULTURE IN THE 20TH CENTURY AND THE BEGINNING OF THE 21ST CENTURY

As it was pointed out, after the Restoring Revolution triumph in 1899 and the establishment of Castro (1899-1908) and Gómez authoritarian governments (1908-1935), parties disappeared from the country's political scene, although some like PCV survived clandestinely.

These organizations resurgence and legalization took place during the political transition initiated by General López Contreras, appointed President after Juan Vicente Gómez's death on December 17th, 1935. During his successor's administration, General Medina Angarita, the new political party founding process continued, these new political parties included AD, which became the most influential in the twentieth century.

López and Medina's political liberalization did not go along with the needed democratization from transitions towards a stable democracy. In particular, the denial to carry out universal, direct and secret elections instead of indirect elections was one of the reasons that led to Medina's overthrow in October, 1945 and to the advent of the "Adeco Triennium". In 1946, the first direct elections were realized in the new century.

With Rómulo Gallegos overthrown in November 1948, a political regression began, leading to parties' disqualification and the persecution and repression of its militants and leaders. With the end of perezjimenismo, on January 23rd, 1958, new doors were opened to the free functioning of political parties and electoral competition among them.

This new democratic cycle, as indicated above, has gone through several stages characterized by the number of organizations participating in the elections, by their program course of action, for their internal unity and electoral strength. In addition, it should be pointed out that the regime evolved from a polyarchy, in Dahl's terms, during the sixties into a 'partyarchy' during the seventies and eighties.

Regardless of the recent changes that have been mentioned, it is noteworthy to conclude this analysis indicating that Venezuelan political culture has revealed the persistence of orientations that give it some continuity. The first one is the marked and repeatedly expressed citizens' distrust towards political parties and their leaders, detected in 1973 in a systematic investigation carried out by Baloyra and Martz.⁵⁰ Distrust shown in the same way as in interpersonal relationships, as well as towards political and social institutions other than parties, which has resulted in the current low levels of social capital in the country.⁵¹

Second, in spite of this distrust, Venezuelans have also repeatedly expressed their conviction that political parties are essential to democracy functioning, which is, likewise, the regime or political system awesomely preferred by them.⁵²

⁵⁰ E. Baloyra J. Martz, *Political Attitudes in Venezuela. Societal Cleavages and Public Opinion*, Austin 1979.

⁵¹ D. Varnagy, *Capital social y aspectos relacionados con la cultura política del venezolano, 1973-2000*, Doctoral Thesis in Political Science presented at Universidad Simón Bolívar, 2003.

⁵² In 2011, according to Latinobarómetro, 71% of Venezuelans expressed their agreement with the statement "Without political parties there cannot be democracy" (58% was the average in Latin America);

Finally, although it seems contradictory to the preceding arguments, high percentages of the population have recurrently expressed that there are times when military coups d'état are justified. In 1973, 54.8% of a national probability sample agreed with this approach, a figure that would rise to 59.2% in 1983.⁵³ In 1993, this figure dropped slightly to 53%⁵⁴, although, as noted previously, the vast majority of citizens had rejected the two 1992 unsuccessful coups.

One of the underlying reasons behind this apparent contradiction lies in the belief that even if the coup d'état attempt fails; it forces the government to correct its wrong policies. This was stated by 61% of those interviewed by the polling firm "Consultores 21" in December 1992.⁵⁵ Additionally, there is a strong conviction that to defeat anarchy and to bring order to the country a "strong hand" of a military man is sometimes required. The elections of General and former dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez as a Senator in 1968 and of Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chávez as President in 1998 are evidence of that entrenched orientation.⁵⁶

Finally, within a context of lasting devotion to the independence war hero, Simón Bolívar, and the long-standing desire for fair distribution of an allegedly immense country wealth, a self-perceived grandiose and charismatic leader counts with a high probability to establish himself as people's destinies guide.⁵⁷ Scenario that becomes more viable if that leader has the support of a political party with a clear populist orientation as PSUV. This one, unlike the nineteenth century parties that promoted social claims by appealing to liberalism, promotes those claims by appealing to 21st Century Socialism.⁵⁸

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- on the other hand, the statement "Democracy may face problems, but it is the best government system" was supported by 86% of them (76% in Latin America).
- ⁵³ A. Torres, 'Fe y desencanto democrático en Venezuela', *Nueva Sociedad*, Nº 77 (1985), pp. 52-64.
- ⁵⁴ G. Villarreal, *Las Representaciones Políticas del Venezolano. Un estudio sobre culturas políticas*, Caracas 2001, p. 366.
- ⁵⁵ H. Koencke, 'Valores y actitudes del venezolano hacia la democracia y el autoritarismo' in H. Castillo et al. (eds.), *Militares y Civiles*, Caracas 2001, p. 207.
- ⁵⁶ The election was invalidated because Pérez Jiménez was not registered as a voter in the Supreme Electoral Council.
- ⁵⁷ F. Coronil, *El Estado Mágico*, Caracas 2002; E. Pino, *Ideas y Mentalidades de Venezuela*, Caracas 2008.
- ⁵⁸ N. Arenas, L. Gómez, *Populismo Autoritario. Venezuela 1999-2005*, Caracas 2006.

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