

# Democratization



Year 4, Issue 20

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of the nation at the end of the century

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to communal power: political  
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# Introduction

The twentieth edition of *Democratization* is an issue that focuses on local power, its history and its role as a space for struggle and resilience. This issue includes articles by Edgardo Mondolfi Gudat, Luis Fernando Castillo Herrera, Maria Isabel Puerta Riera, and an interview by Pedro Pablo Peñaloza with Rafael Ramírez, mayor of Maracaibo.

The first article in this issue is *Lights and Shadows of Decentralization*, by Edgardo Mondolfi Gudat. In this article, the author reviews the changes in the configuration of the Venezuelan State during the 20th century, beginning with the consolidation of a centralized modern State that occurs during the first third of that century as a response to the territorial political situation of the previous century. The article explains the ups and downs of the progressive search for a more balanced distribution of power through constitutional reforms and the implementation of policies with decentralizing aspirations.

The second article is titled *Venezuela (1983-1995). A political look at the nation at the end of the century*. In this article, Luis Fernando Castillo Herrera delves into local power focused on the complexity of the last decade of the 20th century in Venezuela, as a consequence of the country's political, economic, and institutional situation.

The third article in this issue is called *From representative democracy to communal power: political fragmentation as a strategy for the deconstruction of the democratic State in Venezuela*. Its author, María Isabel Puerta Riera, begins by recounting how, with the change

in the Constitution in 1999, the conceived concept of democracy changes in Venezuela, introducing the principle of participation as one of its fundamental pillars. Puerta Riera continues explaining the process of institutional transformation and the changes in the exercise of power that led the country towards a political project totally different from the one established in the Magna Carta, adopting the banner of Socialism of the 21st Century and promoting the consolidation of a Communal state, within the framework of the “Revolution”.

The issue ends with an interview by Pedro Pablo Peñaloza with Mayor Rafael Ramírez Colina. The interview is titled *Rafael Ramírez Colina: “Problems do not wait for the democratic fabric and the institutional framework to be rebuilt; people need solutions”*. In the interview, the journalist questions the mayor about various issues, including the difficulties of being a democratic mayor in an authoritarian regime, his relationship with the central government, the struggle for democratic transition and the pre-electoral phase Venezuela is currently entering.

# Lights and shadows of decentralization

Edgardo Mondolfi Gudat

## **The expression of an old longing**

The political and administrative centralization that consolidated the country since the first third of the 20th century was not only intended to serve as a response to the dislocations suffered during the previous century, but would also be backed by the important ideological support of Positivism. On the one hand, this whole process explains the meaning of the emergence of the modern National State, while on the other, it explains the fact that costs and debts resulted, as would be the damage to a series of legitimate regional aspirations. Hence, seen as it may be seen, it was assumed that the national disintegration experienced until then had had its origin in unresolved historical conflicts, and that the most advisable response was, therefore, the construction of a centralized modern State.

Could the configuration of the Venezuelan State have been different during the 20th century? It is difficult to know, or giving free rein to such a question could only lead to counterfactual and therefore irresponsible speculation. The truth of the matter is that this happened, and this was not necessarily the work of simple willfulness, or providential inspiration, but rather the result of the implementation of a series of policies capable of ensuring a certain durability, which were also effective in the face of the recurrent

idea of the dispersion of authority as a synonym of disorder. If something is clear then, it is that this modern National State annulled the regionalist predominance that had distinguished other processes of political change that had taken place during almost a full century of republican life.

It is, however, possible to formulate one or even two observations from this point. Right at the start one might think, based on what has been said above, that if this modern State was erected as an alternative to dispersion and violence, then a professional and effective national army was the main –and perhaps single– mechanism it could count on to consolidate that centralizing dynamic. This may be largely true except it leaves out a relevant factor. Although the modern Venezuelan State resorted to the power (or to the mere threat) of the newest armed institution as a form of response to the violence commonly assumed as the main instrument of political combat, it would also have to take responsibility, at different moments of its journey during the 20th century, to stimulate the formation of a society capable of cultivating the values of peaceful coexistence.

So, beyond the fact that they had the military readiness and the professionalization of the armed institution to exercise coercion in such a way that any challenge to their authority would be asymmetrical, the State was still capable of integrating the nation through different mechanisms and not necessarily, or in all cases, based on the use (or threat) of violence. We would now have to speak of what the institutional and legal effort that the modern State also made to cement that very idea of belonging to a much more complex reality beyond regional allegiances.

The second thing to note is the following. In general, we usually take for granted that the modern State, as it came to be

known during the 20th century, was the product of the type of management promoted by Gomecism and the cast of positivist ideologues that supported the centralizing project of the national authority. That is not up for debate. Suffice it to point out that the fundamental premise around which that Positivism acted, which was much more somber and stark in its appraisals of social and political reality than the type of Positivism that had preceded it at the end of the 19th century, was that any distribution of power was equivalent, plain and simple, to the dispersion of authority. And these positivists associated with Gomecism did not appeal to a better voice than to the voice of Bolívar and to what he had pointed out regarding what was supposed to be the distribution of power, either in the form of plural executives or federal government schemes, as synonymous with chaos or weakness. What does, on the other hand, tend to go unnoticed (or, at least, is not something around which the necessary emphasis is made) is that, although that modern State was expanding its contents as a planner and regulator of the economy, or as a provider of social, educational, health and cultural services, almost in no case did it intend to abandon its centralizing vocation of authority.

This could be a sort of equivalent to the disappearance of Gómez and Gomecism from the scene, that type of State with highly centralized authority only tried to retrace its steps very late in the 20th century. And, when such was the case, it did so without failing to encounter enormous reluctance and even the presence of very influential voices (e.g. Rafael Caldera, or historic leaders of Democratic Action such as Gonzalo Barrios) who still advised that this State continued to act on the basis of a firmly sustained centralizing trajectory. This means, in other words, that the decentralization attempt that was implemented starting

in the 1990s would not be without a proper legion of opponents and dissatisfied.

Beyond the implications of a type of positivist-rooted thought associated with Gomecism, we should note that, as of 1936, great caution, distrust and fears persisted about what a different type of power distribution could mean. So much so that even when the best time came for the expansion of citizen privileges or the consolidation of the State's guarantee and assistance vocation, after the events of October 18, 1945, these precautions continued to be remarkably present.

It would be convenient to mention an example that is quite revealing when talking about this. In 1947, at the time when the Constituent National Assembly debated the incorporation of the figure of the President of the Republic as a directly and universally elected authority, that same project provided that state governors would continue to be appointed by the National Executive, as per the practice until then. This provoked perhaps one of the richest and most controversial debates among those that took place between the ruling party and some opposition representatives. We speak, for example, of the opinion of the Partido Comunista de Venezuela (despite the fact that, in numbers, they were a frank minority) or, even, that of some independent deputies close to Acción Democrática. In both cases, communists and independents would highlight the notable contradiction that, in their opinion, was revealed by the fact that Venezuelans had the right to choose, for the first time, the President of the Republic directly and universally, but not so their regional authorities.

However, given the official insistence according to which the revolutionary regime, being provisional and fragile, could not run the risk of being at the mercy of resurrected chiefdoms, the result



of such a debate was to let the future take charge of resolving such a knot. Such a thing did not happen of course, since, firstly, sooner rather than later came the shipwreck of that attempt at democratic construction and then came the viscous interlude of the military decade between 1948 and 1958.

As of 1959, that is, when the time had come to reinstate a competitive electoral culture and to assume the democratic fact as a binding expression of the whole society, the issue of a more balanced power distribution (and, thus, that of the direct election of the highest regional authorities) would re-emerge among the many pending claims. However, it could not be said that the precautions, whose origins went back to positivist mistrust, had not yet subdued. So much so that, despite the fact that there was already a strategic action of unity between the different political forces (as had not happened during the period 1945-1948), the idea that democracy was not a consolidated fact and that trust in the future looked still relative.

Hence, even when what the deconcentration of power could mean in times of new expectations was handled with respect, the Delegate Commission that was in charge of drafting the Constitution that would be sanctioned in 1961 (since there was not, in this case, a Constituent Assembly) resolved to let the issue be left to the future once again. In any case, the difference was that this time it was done through the adoption of a nebulous transitional arrangement; but the certain fact is that the drafters of that Constitution did not fail to exhibit their deep reticence towards Federalism.

Of course, none of this prevented the implementation of processes and policies leading to greater local and regional participation during the second half of the 20th century or, in any

case, serving to revitalize or reinvigorate the economic dynamics of the different areas of the country. This is demonstrated by the creation of administrative regions or regional corporations (e.g. *Corpozulia* or *Corporiente*), as well as the stimulus that was offered by the State in favor of the creation of regional universities, or to promote the establishment of regional broadcasters, television stations or mass consumption press as a way to abolish the privilege held until then by the capital of the republic regarding knowledge of national problems and, also, to guarantee the simultaneity of information. That is why it would not be convenient to speak of the annulment or total suffocation of regional aspirations. But the truth is that the choice of its authorities would be another matter. Thus, the direct election of governors (and, by extension, at the local level, of mayors) would once again be relegated to a pending assignment.

With ups and downs, or between shortcomings and achievements, a forty-year period passed between 1959 and 1989 that ended up revealing two relevant things simultaneously: we are talking, on the one hand, about the increasingly complex level reached by that modern State and, as a harsh paradox, its increasingly lower capacity to offer answers given the incidence produced by demographic growth (that is, by a population quadrupling in less than half a century) on the provision of public services. We then talked about what the challenge of continuing to honor its commitments and obligations at the level of social demands generated up to that time would mean for the State. But we are also talking, on the other hand, about the development of a much more demanding society than the one that could have existed during the first half of the 20th century.

In other words: as it became more complex in its roles and attributions, or as it became more difficult for it to satisfy

demands, that same centralized State had to deal with a society that not only became more pluralized but also more sophisticated in terms of their expectations and claims. Such claims, which would also become more peremptory, included a return to the desire for what should be a greater sincerity of power, especially considering that the country had conjured up the fears that had existed around the weakening of national authority by having already reached a point of institutional maturity (and even national sense) to visualize, sans complexes or traumas, the need to confront centralist preventions, which were not only part of a heavy heritage from *Gomecism* times but were shared by the founding members of the democratic essay.

This then led (amid forty years of successes and failures, as has been said) to the need to provide the model of democratic coexistence with new centers of gravitation based on a process of political reforms. For this, there would be a list of recommendations, as a roadmap, formulated since 1984 by the *Comisión para la Reforma del Estado* (COPRE) which would be difficult not to qualify as the most intelligent way (even though it may have come late and, therefore, too fast) that could be conceived in terms of self-correction of the course followed since 1959.

In the first place, this clarifies that what was intended was to oxygenate the political system, something that took a lot of effort to consolidate, i.e. the democratic national project. Second, by conceiving it as a self-correcting essay, this meant that Venezuelan democracy did not intend to choose the path of suicide. And no less important, in third place, is that if there was talk of “oxygenating” the system (by way of dismantling many of the prerogatives held until then by the State, improving the efficiency of the tax system, the transparency of the financing mechanisms of political parties, or the reform of the Suffrage Law, just to name a few), this also

presupposed “oxygenating” regional expectations after the long dynamic that political and administrative centralization implied as a basic requirement of the construction of the modern state in the 20th century. The process, as is well known, not only led to autonomy of action being transferred to the regions, but also gave rise to new centers of legitimation, redistribution, and pluralization of power through the direct election of mayors and governors.

Now, it can be said that, as a result of this process, the same thing happened with regard to social investment and, even more so, with regard to the weight of some non-visible works such as the provision of drinking water, environmental sanitation, or the construction of a huge sewage system: the democratic regime simply did not know, or was not even interested in promoting its achievements. They just took them for granted. And, among such achievements, was what was done by COPRE. But the important thing in any case was that the reform took place and that chaos did not come, nor did the ghosts of the past for the simple reason that the democratic system already exhibited the necessary robustness and muscle for such a path to be followed. After all, the democratic regime could boast of having consolidated stability by defeating armed movements and insurgencies of all kinds during the 1960s; but already, from the following decade, faced with a “pacified” country, it was difficult to accept that the requirement of stability continued to close many avenues to the requirement of participation. And this parameter had to continue in force until the “reformist democrats” decided to challenge the “traditionalist democrats” around what they considered should be an *aggiornamento* of the model.

Which also means that, in the face of the list of demands made by a society increasingly critical of the democratic course,

the doomsayers that responded to the sensitivities of the past had to remain planted in their place after the reception that, at the collective, seemed to have COPRE as a self-correcting mechanism.

Certainly, decentralization was not perfect, nor did it claim to be, since it did not include some things that were also aspired to, such as the idea of fiscal federalism; but, in any case, there were many powers that, from then on, ended up acting directly at the hands of regional authorities. Moreover, the relevance of this effort to decongest and open up new spaces for local action should be highlighted. We refer to the fact that this process also allowed for such regional authorities, by carving out their own leadership and showing an efficient balance in their management, aspiring to project themselves as valid options at the time of the presidential elections.

Even more, after implementing such reforms, the coexistence between the central government and the regions did not manifest as a traumatic experience, rather it was the opposite. There was no dispersal of authority, no chaos, no civil war. So much so that President Carlos Andrés Pérez, who had to debut before that experience during his second administration, interacted in terms of enormous fluidity with regional authorities that were not only expressions opposed to his party but also had reservations or discrepancies in relation to some of the objectives of the reform recommended by COPRE, which were aimed more at the economic sphere. Pérez respected and accepted that dynamic; the same was to happen during the interim presidency of Ramón J. Velásquez, as well as during the second presidency of Rafael Caldera, despite the enormous reservations that the latter expressed during the 1980s when COPRE launched an astonishingly broad process of consultations at the national level. In any case, and despite the fact that their efforts ended up being criticized in other ways,

the three presidents knew how to interpret what could entail the emergence of authentic regional leaderships for the health of democratic dynamics.

### **The past as a project**

“The past as a project” is an expression that the historian Tomás Straka has used with great skill to refer to different expressions associated with the way in which the so-called Bolivarian Revolution has tried to trace out a confused (and perhaps not so much) future since it came into existence as political alternative in 1999. Among these expressions is precisely the fact of having dusted off the old Bolivarian (and positivist) precautions regarding the nature of authority and, if you will, to insist that the guarantee and efficiency of that authority resides in everything that can be done in favor of re-centralizing it, regardless of the fact that it has had to resort to new wineskins to store old wines to that end. We thus speak of front instruments, such as “the Communal State”, or of formulas loaded with pure sensationalism, such as that of “the new geometry of power”, which have supposedly sought to redefine decentralization while actually aggravating centralism.

The worst thing is that, like many of the most radical changes implemented by the Bolivarian Revolution, this one has gone against what is strictly provided for in the 1999 Constitution with regard to the preservation, and even the expansion of the decentralizing dynamic initiated a decade earlier. It is not in vain that there are those who observe that the current Constitution allowed the furthering of decentralization, especially with regard to the autonomy of the municipalities and, specifically, in relation to the transfer of powers by the National Power.

However, as the lawyer and professor José Ignacio Hernández has pointed out, the communal State was conceived to weaken that State (named in the 1999 Constitution as the “decentralized federal State”) through a skillful manipulation of language. He synthesizes the process in this way: “Thus, the communal State maintains decentralization, but changing its content. This no longer consists of the transfer of powers from the National Power to states and municipalities, but in the transfer of powers to the instances of People’s Power through (...) the Federal Council of Government. Since the instances of People’s Power depend, directly or indirectly, on the National Government, which in turn dominates the Federal Council of Government, this redefinition of the concept of decentralization (...) reinforced, therefore, the powers of the President of the Republic” [Own translation]. In other words; checkmate on the governments and municipalities, as they had existed until then, constitutionally speaking.

Apart from the aforementioned author, the historian Catalina Banko, the university professor Carlos Mascareño, and the researcher Rosangel Álvarez have offered a series of views, from critical and professional reflection, about the scope of this centralizing escalation promoted by the Bolivarian Revolution. So, in addition to being a literature of enormous quality, it is easily available and, therefore, it would be unnecessary to gloss it for the purposes of these pages. What could be said by way of closing before a confused and discouraged country is that, seen from a historical perspective, the result of such reforms was the configuration of a much more diverse political map, causing the achievements of a certain redistribution of power to endure, until a not so remote past, while revealing the gestation and emergence of new leaderships.

Perhaps there are no great works in sight as a result of the decentralization practiced for just over a decade; but this is due to the fact that this experience did not last long, and perhaps it is also due to the fact that not all the scope that was planned was recorded. But, even so, I prefer to bet in favor of the decentralizing desire for the simple reason that perhaps it will be possible to return to that path once we can leave behind the actions of this State model which, although it may continue to be authoritarian in its conduct, reflexes and practices, has come to reveal, in the end, a huge loss of control.

## Recommended readings

Álvarez, R. “Perspectivas de la descentralización y la participación ciudadana en el Gobierno de Hugo Chávez (1999-2009)”. In: *Scielo. Revista de Ciencias Sociales*, Vol. 16, N. 4 (Maracaibo), December 2010. Available in: [http://ve.scielo.org/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S1315-95182010000400009](http://ve.scielo.org/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1315-95182010000400009)

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# Venezuela (1983-1995).

## A political look of the nation at the end of the century

Luis Fernando Castillo Herrera

The nineties were particularly complex for a country that had experienced clear institutional, economic, and political progress since 1958. The consolidation of democracy as a system had opened up a panorama of multiple possibilities, all of them apparently positive. However, a succession of unfortunate events set off alarms, many of which went unheeded.

It should be noted that democracy in Venezuela and specifically the second democratic project, initiated after the overthrow of Marcos Pérez Jiménez, faced strong opposition, first by the military, then by civilians and members of the leftist parties, who, taking advantage of the Cuban revolutionary wave, outlined harsh attacks as the attempted coups of the 1960s. So that:

The second Liberal Democratic Republic did not start without opponents, or skepticism about its objectives and institutionalization; the potential risks that its implementation would have on republican life were warned. From very early

on, the fundamental criticism of the democratic system took the form of political parties<sup>1</sup>.

Political parties, and especially Acción Democrática (AD), were harshly criticized throughout the democratic period. Already between 1945 and 1948 they had been accused of exercising power with a marked sectarianism, from 1958 the criticisms and accusations revolved around corruption and bipartisanship with the COPEI party as the second political force. However, the system seemed to take shape beyond parties and elections. Once again, the presence of oil occupied a preponderant role, making room for the frenzied desires of the rulers and the citizens. Guillermo Tell Aveledo explains that, after the early seventies, Venezuela would enter a new stage, one where society had subscribed its varied needs to the figure of the state and the messianic action of black gold: "Since the seventies, the society that without distinction of class had been stimulated to desire bonanza, had not been required to be more productive, nor more efficient, nor more autonomous"<sup>2</sup>.

The farewell of the eighties would be just as dramatic as the beginning of those ten years. In 1983, the national economy would have to assimilate the concrete evidence of a crisis that appeared in its most shocking form, the currency devaluation:

At the end of the 1970s, a sustained process of economic deterioration began for Venezuelan society, which would mean a dramatic involution in the quality of life of vast sectors of the population (...) The economic recession will produce setbacks in important social achievements obtained

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1 Guillermo Tell Aveledo, *La Segunda República Liberal Democrática, 1959-1998* (Caracas: Fundación Rómulo Betancourt, 2014), 34. (Own translation).

2 *Ibidem*, 35. (Own translation).

during the development of the import substitution model, creating the conditions for the discomfort of various social and political actors, who will lead the intense and confrontational mobilizations at the end of the century<sup>3</sup>.

February 21, 1983 has remained as a milestone in the memory of Venezuelans, marked with the ink of the recession. It was the confirmation of the decline of a system that required important and complex adjustments, many of them difficult to assimilate for a society that little by little had forgotten the expression “crisis”: “That date is known in Venezuela as Black Friday and it was the first warning sign about the economic crisis that would with ups and downs last well into the XXI century”<sup>4</sup>.

From that date and its deep implications, a succession of actions will emerge, some seeking to solve problems, others, creating new ones. Both citizens and political representatives were aware that a new reality was approaching. Let us remember the President-elect of the Republic who, in the act of being sworn in, said “...I receive a mortgaged Venezuela...”. It was not a speech that sought to overshadow the management of the previous president. Luis Herrera Campíns knew that the clouds that darkened the horizon were not temporary.

Margarita López Maya, in her book, *Del viernes negro al referendo revocatorio*, states that one of the reasons that slowed the deterioration of the country's political, economic and social system was associated with the application of measures aimed at evaluating and correcting imbalances. Therefore, that expression regarding Venezuelan rulers of the eighties and nineties who

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3 Margarita López Maya, *Del viernes negro al referendo revocatorio* (Caracas: Alfadil, 2005), 21. (Own translation).

4 *Ibidem*, 23. (Own translation).

stood idly admiring the devouring fire is absolutely false, so that: “the fact that Venezuelan society has been able to overcome the severe crisis political (...) resorting to institutional mechanisms and without the breakdown of its democratic system, is due, among other factors, to the State reform process that began in 1984 with the constitution of Copre”<sup>5</sup>.

The Presidential Commission for the Reform of the State (COPRE), created in 1984, was made up of a large group of figures, professionals and politicians from different positions, who all had a common objective, “...to carry out a systematic and in-depth study to offer forceful proposals for the decentralization and reform of the State, and to give rise to creating greater space for citizen participation”<sup>6</sup>. COPRE was important, it showed that the country, and the Venezuelan democracy even more so, was not infallible in the face of deterioration, like any other system that required attention. However, the commission’s assessments were ignored, with the election for governors probably being the only suggestion that was considered and applied.

By 1988, Venezuela would witness a new electoral contest, marked by several factors, all of them associated with the structural crisis that the country was experiencing. The victorious candidate was Carlos Andrés Pérez (CAP) of Acción Democrática. There was a triumphalist aura around him, not only with regard to the votes he could obtain, but also the changes he would generate in the country. For citizens, CAP’s election could translate into a potential reverse on the effects of the crisis. The sensations were so hopeful that the swearing-in of the president took place outside

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5 *Ibidem*, 115. (Own translation).

6 Elías Pino Iturrieta (Coord.) *Historia mínima de Venezuela*. Ciudad de México, El Colegio de México, 2019, p. 204. (Own translation).

the usual spaces, the Congress had been left empty and a theater room was set up to anoint the new ruler:

On February 2, 1989, the semi-hexagonal stage of nine hundred square meters of the Sala Ríos Reyna was occupied almost entirely by a replica of the Senate dais (...) Pérez was sworn in by a co-partisan, Octavio Lepage, who was the president of the Senate, and as if that were not enough, he received the command of another party colleague, Jaime Lusinchi, an old friend. The path seemed clear for the new government. The party had to be with pomp<sup>7</sup>.

In a little over twenty days, CAP's government would be addressing its first conflicts, this time, of a social nature. After announcing the economic measures to be taken –liberation of prices, increase in service costs, increase in gasoline and public transport up to 30%–, a group of carriers displaying the most disproportionate of excesses, would collect the increase without the consent of any body, thus unleashing collective protests on February 27, 1989.

The cellophane was torn, the honeymoon was over, and the country demanded new and efficient actions, while the popularity of the country's main political parties, especially Acción Democrática, was significantly diminishing. This situation would leave the stage set for the development of the first regional elections.

### **Gloria Lizárraga de Capriles and Lolita Aniyar de Castro, to the rescue of politics**

With asphalt still steaming from the events that began on February 27, the government would announce a series of reforms

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7 Mirtha Rivero, *La rebelión de los náufragos* (Caracas: Editorial Alfa), 32.

aimed at readjusting and reinstating the functioning of the system. These were measures already suggested by COPRE in 1984. In this way, the Congress of the Republic would indicate the approval of the following laws: Law on the Election and Removal of State Governors, Law on the Period of the Public Powers of the States, Organic Law of Decentralization, Delimitation and Transfer of Competences of the Public Power, Organic Law of Municipal Regime. All these new laws joined those already sanctioned in 1988, such as the Organic Law of the Council of the Judiciary, the objective was set not only in the model supported by decentralization, but also in the need to create trust in the citizenry.

The power to elect governors attributed to the President of the Republic was now to be at the hands of the people. The voters now had the right and the duty to elect their regional representatives. However, the novelty was not met with the excitement of voters. The people disdainfully observed the electoral rite and the future elections scheduled for the month of December looked to a large extent like a space for "punishment vote" on the ruling party.

The political scientist Luis Salamanca comments that, close to the 1989 elections and later in 1993, voters saw "...a dynamic of electoral misalignment without realignment, because voters were not attracted by any electoral offer, but took refuge in an anti-political attitude, more precisely, anti-partisan"<sup>8</sup>.

The discouragement he speaks of will be clearly evidenced in the results of that December 3, 1989. President Pérez had reached the chair of Miraflores obtaining victory in 19 of the 20 states. By the time of the regional elections, the Acción Democrática party

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8 Luis Salamanca, *¿Por qué vota la gente?* (Caracas: Editorial Alfa, 2012), 139. (Own translation).

would lose 9 of the 20 possible governorships, followed by COPEI who obtained 7 governorships, while La Causa R and MAS divided the two remaining entities. Clearly, AD remained the main political force in the country, however, its defeats in states such as Anzoátegui, Miranda, Zulia, Bolívar, and Carabobo was a clear indicator that matters were not at their best.

Furthermore, there was a more forceful factor that demonstrated citizens' discomfort, their lack of interest in the electoral rite, the AD party and the state of affairs that involved that process, which was the phenomenon of abstention:

Both the opposition vote and the electoral abstention, which reached the figure of 54.85%, acted as mechanisms to vent the prevailing political discontent and social unrest, sending a clear message, although unheard then by the hegemonic actors<sup>9</sup>.

In the midst of that chaotic and disastrous panorama, new representations were presented in the political concert. Among these new figures we not only find the emerging parties such as the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) or La Causa R (LCR), but also important female leaders emerged. Ismenia de Villalba had already presented herself as a candidate in the 1988 elections. Although this first presentation of a woman as a presidential candidate could not be entirely brilliant, it was very clear that the electoral scenario would no longer be expressed exclusively by traditional male political figures.

Under the conditions of crisis, the experience of the 1988 elections with the presence of Ismenia de Villalba, a population upset with the latest measures and actions developed by the

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9 Margarita López Maya. *Del viernes negro al referendo revocatorio...*, p. 119. [Own translation].



government, the electoral process of 1989 was carried out, which was the first to elect governors. Gloria Lizárraga de Capriles was elected.

Baruta did not yet exist as an independent municipality. Product of the reforms aimed at decentralization, it would obtain its autonomy in 1989 after the approval of the Organic Law of Municipal Regime. Thus, Baruta separated from the Sucre District and would start a new path, a new history. The political pages of the brand new municipality were inaugurated with the signing of its first female mayor.

Before her election, Gloria Lizárraga had already been carrying out activities and promoting changes in her community. The COPEI party saw in her the necessary qualities to win and start a social project in the municipality. The green party won a total of 101 mayorships in those elections, including Baruta.

Although we had already had female members in the Venezuelan Congress, never had a municipal or state entity been under the command of a woman as a result of direct, secret, and universal suffrage. It was without a doubt the most important triumph up to that moment for the women's movement that had emerged at the beginning of the century, when a group of women addressed a letter to President Eleazar López Contreras demanding a series of reforms. That group that would later achieve the consecration of the female vote for the presidential elections in 1947 found its reflection in Gloria's victory.

After celebrations and cheers, an action plan came in place. The team of the new mayor had to get down to work. Soon, the new appointees came to understand that things would not come easy. That old adage "*trabajar con las uñas*" would fittingly describe their struggle:

Given that the old Sucre District concentrated its powers in Petare, Lizárraga had to take on the task of building Baruta's institutions and identity from scratch, in the midst of a country that was already showing symptoms of economic crisis and political instability after El Caracazo. The leader herself said that the first headquarters of the Mayor's Office of Baruta operated on the third floor of the Plaza Las Américas shopping center, in a place with rented chairs and boxes instead of filing cabinets and desks. She relates that, due to the lack of resources, she had to call the companies located in the municipality to advance the payment of their taxes and thus be able to settle the payroll of their workers. Neither she nor her administrative officials were paid until they had stable income<sup>10</sup>.

"It was a beautiful experience; I have been very happy being the first female mayor of Baruta and of the country"<sup>11</sup>, Lizárraga commented in an interview. Her social and political work had begun very young, "at 14 years of age, with the flourishing of democracy in Venezuela, Lizárraga began in the ranks of the COPEI social-christian party. There she was an active member where she advocated for the most vulnerable sectors of society, a facet that she maintained during her administration and in her humanitarian work once she was away from the political spotlight"<sup>12</sup>.

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10 Jordan. F. "El legado de Gloria Lizárraga de Capriles, la madre del municipio", El Diario, March, 03, 2021. Available in: <https://eldiario.com/2021/03/31/el-legado-de-gloria-lizarraga-de-capriles-la-madre-del-municipio-baruta/> (Own translation).

11 Entrevista a Gloria Lizárraga de Capriles. Available in: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NAUb7HPCoDI&t=18s> (Own translation)."

12 Jordan. F. "El legado de Gloria Lizárraga de Capriles, la madre del municipio", El Diario, March, 03, 2021. Available in: <https://eldiario.com/>

Open-air markets, organization and support for the development of different sports disciplines and the creation of the municipal police during her first year in office were part of the indelible legacy of Gloria Lizárraga. At the same time, her presence as ruler opened a window that reaffirmed (if there was still any doubt) that the mission of women as citizens had to be global, participation as voters was not enough, it was necessary to extend actions to the very act of governing. After 1992, when her period of government ended, new candidates and new support from voters would appear. Such was the case of Ivonne Attas, who became the next female mayor of the municipality.

Thus, we arrive at the year 1992, remembered by Venezuelans with sadness. Members of the Armed Forces under a nocturnal operation try to depose President Carlos Andrés Pérez, who on the day of the uprising was recently back in the country after his participation in the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. The rebels tried to control several important states of the country, including the capital city. However, as the morning progressed and with the dawn, the options of the group of plotters began to dissipate.

That morning, Venezuelans would come to know the then Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chávez Frías. His unknown effigy would soon become the vehicle to channel the different criticisms towards the Pérez government. The different opponents of the government would line up their harshest criticism and, later, even a forceful denunciation of embezzlement against the president himself would arise.

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2021/03/31/el-legado-de-gloria-lizarraga-de-capriles-la-madre-del-municipio-baruta/ (Own translation).

In the midst of that convulsive climate, new regional elections were held. Those elections marked the end of Gloria Lizárraga's gubernatorial career. The municipality remained in the hands of Ángel Enrique Zambrano, and in the annals of Baruta the name of its first female mayor would be inscribed forever. That first experience of a woman elected by popular vote would soon be replicated in the state of Zulia.

The electoral environment would maintain the same acute situation. The regional elections of 1992, like those held in 1989, were preceded by convulsive events that dynamited the aspirations of the white party, but beyond that, they broke the feeling towards the institutional character represented in the popular elections. The coup attempts of 1992 had created a murky atmosphere prior to December 6 of that year, when Venezuelans had to go to the polls to elect new governors or re-elect those who had shown a more or less decent management. The results would be overwhelming on two counts, firstly, abstentionism was maintained, even though it fell by 4% (see Table A and B), on the other hand, Acción Democrática lost their position as the main electoral force in the regional sphere, losing four of the eleven governorships obtained in 1989.

<b>Table A</b>				
<b>Elections 1989</b>				
	<b>Governors</b>		<b>Mayors</b>	
	Absolute	Relative	Absolute	Relative
Valid votes	3.978.290	94,5	3.978.803	95,9
Invalid votes	220.346	5,5	166.703	4,1
Counted votes	4.198.636	100,0	4.145.506	100,0
Abstention	5.0007.486	54,9	5.007.486	54,9
Voting population	9.205.849	100,0	9.205.849	100,0

<b>Table B</b>				
<b>Elections 1989</b>				
	<b>Governors</b>		<b>Mayors</b>	
	Absolute	Relative	Absolute	Relative
Valid votes	4.635.607	95,8	4.471.988	91,8
Invalid votes	202.473	4,2	396.662	8,2
Counted votes	4.838.080	100,0	4.868.650	100,0
Abstention	4.979.439	50,7	4.979.439	50,7
Voting population	9.817.519	100,0	9.817.519	100,0

Source: Statistics Directorate of the Supreme Electoral Council and the National Electoral Council.

For its part, COPEI's rebound in the regional elections, the re-election of Oswaldo Álvarez Paz in Zulia, and the attempted coups of 1992 generated a climate that offered an apparent opportunity for the Zulian leader in the presidential elections of 1993. Álvarez Paz would become the candidate of the green awning, for which he had to leave his post as state governor.

On December 5, 1993, general elections were held, where Zulians, in addition to voting for a new president, also had to choose their new governor. With 40.74% of the valid votes, and the support of parties such as MAS, Convergencia and URD, Lolita Aniyar de Castro won and became the first governor elected by popular vote.

The new government would concentrate its efforts on trying to build a social project. Aniyar de Castro considered that the foundations of good management lay in offering opportunities for growth and development to the most needy sectors. She had come to power with the support of many identified leftist parties, such as: PCV, Liga Socialista, Bandera Roja, Movimiento Electoral del Pueblo, and La Causa Radical, however, beyond imposing an

ideological discourse, her mission was mainly to work for the state development.

Lolita Aniyar de Castro came to the governorship at fifty-six years of age, had significant training in the world of Criminal Law and criminology, for many years she had been part of the faculty of the University of Zulia, she knew the strengths and the weaknesses of an entity that was now under her direction. Politics and state responsibilities were not alien to her either. She had previously represented Zulia in the Legislative Assembly and in the National Congress of Venezuela.

During her administration, the VI Regional Development Plan was designed, and the main emphasis was on reducing poverty, focusing on opportunities for the most needy sectors. It was a regional project with a “deeply social accent, privileging social justice, respect for the rights of people, direct contact with the vulnerable and a special affection and recognition for the marginalized (children, women, the elderly and indigenous)”<sup>13</sup>. One of the most outstanding aspects in the actions of the new governor was represented in the capacity of citizen consultation. In this sense, she used various tools such as the Regional Development Agency and the Human Solidarity Committee to probe the realities of the communities.

Aniyar de Castro wanted to strengthen the cultural aspect, which would allow an assimilation of the values of justice and equity: “The Ministry of Culture promoted the Local Government Power Councils, a figure created for the organization of various cultural manifestations of the communities, however, the

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13 Jennifer Fuenmayor; Haydée Ochoa Henríquez. “Descentralización y modernización administrativa de las gobernaciones en Venezuela: el caso del estado Zulia”, *Revista Venezolana de Economía y Ciencias Sociales*, vol. 9, N. 1, January-April, 2003, pp. 195-196. (Own translation).

fundamental purpose was to organize people in any manifestation of life at the community level. From the Government Secretariat, work was done on the formation of the Citizen Security Committee as a form of active participation of the neighbors in the constitution of crime prevention mechanisms<sup>14</sup>. Her extensive experience in Criminal Law allowed her to focus her management on crime prevention, reduce crime channels, and bet on a more efficient judicial system.

In this sense, for Lolita Aniyar, the “development of human capital as the origin and destination of government action, and with it the confrontation and eradication of poverty”<sup>15</sup> was of vital importance. The country that Venezuelans experienced during that period 1993-1995 was radically different from today’s country, however, there were important and structural problems that required immediate action, for instance, the high cost of the basic basket, assistance services and the educational plan, goals that Aniyar wanted to achieve, but the national context prevented her from doing so.

Clearly, good intentions are not enough, managing a regional entity as complex and important as the State of Zulia requires the understanding of a series of notable variables. In this sense, the government of Lolita Aniyar:

... attempted to tackle the institutional fragmentation of social policy, and although she did not develop a totally coherent policy in the area of social economy, she did place it as a priority area, in accordance with the central government's statements and guidelines in its IX Plan de la Nación.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 196. (Own translation).

<sup>15</sup> Lolita Aniyar de Castro. *El Zulia que Queremos, El Zulia que Podemos Alcanzar*. Programa de Gobierno 1993-1996. Maracaibo, Venezuela, p. 30. (Own translation).

However, the support policy for the sector lacks a coordinated institutional base in this short period, despite the creation of the Office for the Coordination of Social Policies and the effort that ORDEC made to organize the participation of the communities. In general, the lack of systematic information for decision-making and the diversity of ideological positions were the basic elements for not achieving a more coherent and effective support policy for the social economy during this period. In addition to the persistence of a social policy with a welfare tendency<sup>16</sup>.

Regardless, she also made an effort in the complex field of housing. She did not promise to solve that costly problem, however, she offered benefits to promote the acquisition of necessary materials for construction through the Human Solidarity Committee and the Institute of Social Development. Of course, the self-construction of houses did not solve the existing housing problems and in some cases could aggravate them due to the lack of urban planning in the communities.

With regard to privatization, a controversial issue during the early 1990s, the government of Aníbal de Castro went the other way. She tried to ensure that the port, the airport, and the Rafael Urdaneta bridge were managed in the best way, avoiding acts that could jeopardize the proper functioning of these three posts of economic income: “after carrying out an evaluation that reveals corruption, non-compliance of contracts by private companies, lack of maintenance, operational problems and provision of an

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<sup>16</sup> Gabriela Moran Leal, Emis Cavadias Gómez y Carlos Eduardo López, “Las organizaciones de la economía social en la Reforma del Estado en Venezuela: Caso del Estado Zulia 1989-2000”, *Tendencias* Revista de la Facultad de Ciencias Económicas y Administrativas, III, no.1 (Universidad de Nariño, Julio de 2002): 159. (Own translation).



inefficient service”<sup>17</sup> the government decided to gradually reverse the privatization that had already begun at a state level.

Lolita Aniyar thought that it was possible to establish a social project in the state of Zulia and decided to stand for re-election in 1995. She was convinced that things were going in the right direction and it was necessary to continue. However, the country had taken another course. The 1992 coup attempt, the corruption case in which the President of the Republic was implicated, the discrediting of political parties, and a latent desire that cried out for immediate results, brought about the consequences that military outsiders began to see themselves as potential candidates to run the country. Francisco Arias Cárdenas would win those elections and at the end of his mandate he would be re-elected. The country entered by yet another new route and an uncertain horizon awaited.

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17 Jennifer Fuenmayor; Haydée Ochoa Henríquez. *Descentralización y modernización administrativa de las gobernaciones en Venezuela: el caso del estado Zulia...*, p. 197. (Own translation).

# From representative democracy to communal power: political fragmentation as a strategy for the deconstruction of the democratic State in Venezuela

María Isabel Puerta

## **Political-normative bases of participatory democracy**

With the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (CRBV), the concept of participatory democracy was introduced to replace the representativeness that until then characterized the political model in Venezuela. Its incorporation reflected the aspiration of Hugo Chávez's political project to "refound a democratic, participatory and leading society", as stated in the preamble of the 1999 Constitution. This incorporation represents a change in the conception of democracy, as it considers other forms of direct expression of sovereignty that also needed a set of laws for its development, anticipating the transformations of a political, economic, social, educational and cultural nature that

would come, with the transversalization of the constitution by the principle of participation<sup>1</sup>.

The transition of the 1961 Constitution, which in article 3 stated that *"the government of the Republic of Venezuela is and will always be democratic, representative, responsible and alternative"*, gave way to the 1999 Constitution, which states in its 5th article that *"sovereignty resides non-transferably in the people, who exercise it directly in the manner provided for in this Constitution and the law, and indirectly, through suffrage, by the bodies that exercise Public Power"*.

The aspiration to deepen democracy was justified by incorporating the participation and leading role of society in political leadership in the evolution of a model of democracy that, as a transition from the authoritarian model of the early twentieth century in Venezuela, assumed the right to vote as its expansion, seeking to reduce the gap between the leaders and the people as sovereign<sup>2</sup> but that with time and not only institutional but also social development, it became insufficient.

The 1999 Constitution incorporated the notion of participation, extending the idea traditionally associated with democracy without eluding representativeness by retaining legislative bodies. This constitution provides an account of instruments that not only give the people a more significant role in public decision-making but also provide them with tools with which they can

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1 Combellas, Ricardo. "Representación versus participación en la constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela. Análisis de un falso dilema". Chapter of the book: *El Sistema Político en la constitución Bolivariana de Venezuela*, 67–81. Valencia, España: Tirant Lo Blanch, 2006..

2 Rojas, Reinaldo. "De la democracia representativa a la democracia participativa y protagónica" (*Seminario Venezuela and the Caribbean: Crisis and Integration*. Centre for Latin America and the Caribbean, West Indies University, 2002).

control parliamentary management, such as accountability, a control mechanism for decision-making for the protection of the popular will of which they are leaders.

The political model developed from this leading and participatory conception of democracy rests on a set of laws implemented over the last two decades. From the Constitution of 1999, the preparation of a complex legal framework on which popular power would be built began. This is, thus, the case of an incremental model of institutional change that was not present in the initial proposal of the then-candidate Hugo Chávez in 1998<sup>3</sup>.

### **From participatory and protagonist democracy to the Socialist Revolution of the XXI Century and the communal State: a characterization of the revolutionary political project**

The notion of participatory and protagonist democracy has accompanied the discourse and political actions of Chavismo since it came to power in Venezuela. However, that aspiration would take a turn with the so-called revolution by adopting the banner of Socialism of the 21st Century, which, as López Maya points out<sup>4</sup>, altered *“the direction of the country towards a political project different from the one conceived by the CRBV 1999”*, even though the dissident currents of Chavismo itself argue that *“popular power was the cornerstone of the Bolivarian revolution”*<sup>5</sup>. Now, despite the efforts to consolidate it, towards the end of his

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3 López Maya, Margarita, “Socialismo y comunas en Venezuela”, *Nueva Sociedad* (Nueva Sociedad, April 16, 2018), <https://nuso.org/articulo/socialismo-y-comunas-en-venezuela/>, 59.

4 López Maya, Margarita, *El Ocaso Del Chavismo*, vol. 124 (Caracas, Venezuela: Editorial Alfa, 2016), 105.

5 García-Guadilla, María Pilar, and Castro, Ulises, “¿Logrará Sobrevivir El Poder Popular?”, *NACLA* (NACLA, March 11, 2022), <https://nacla.org/comunas-poder-popular-venezuela>, 1.

third term, Chávez's concern was the lack of deepening of the revolution given the failures in consolidating the *communal State*<sup>6</sup>.

With the argument of the representation of the people, in Venezuela, there has been a process of institutional transformation from the convening of a Constituent National Assembly (1999) producing a new constitution that later, through a constitutional amendment (2009), which introduced greater changes that would end up modifying the conditions for the exercise of power in Venezuela. Both the horizontal and vertical exercise of power have been distorted, with the control exercised by the National Executive over the rest of the public powers<sup>7</sup>, as well as a progressive weakening of participation, more recently in the framework of the promotion of the *communal State*<sup>8</sup>.

The discourse from the ruling party promoted instances and instruments for strengthening participation. While parallel to its deployment of public policies, these evidenced the deepening of control by the central power. It is enough to inquire about the institutional framework that promotes this parallel State, constituted by the system of missions, in which D'Elia identifies four impacts<sup>9</sup>:

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- 6 Puerta Riera, María Isabel, "Indicadores de democratización en los Consejos Comunes. Caso de estudio: estado Carabobo," in *Indicadores de democratización en los Consejos Comunes. Caso de estudio: estado Carabobo*. (Universidad Central de Venezuela, 2013).
  - 7 Human Rights Watch, ed., "Una década de Chávez," Human Rights Watch (Human Rights Watch, September 12, 2017), <https://www.hrw.org/es/report/2008/09/18/una-decada-de-chavez/intolerancia-politica-y-oportunidades-perdidas-para-el>.
  - 8 Puerta Riera, María Isabel, "Democracia en transición: caracterización de la democracia venezolana en el período 1999-2013," in *Democracia en transición: caracterización de la democracia venezolana en el período 1999-2013*, 2013.
  - 9 Yolanda D'Elia, *Las misiones sociales en Venezuela: una aproximación a su comprensión y análisis*, 1ra ed. (Caracas, Venezuela: ILDIS, 2006), 212.

- a) Social impact: inclusion and social equality
- b) Political impact: participatory and leading democracy
- c) Institutional impact: changes in the vision of the State and the role of institutions.
- d) Cultural impact: changes in values, identities and behaviors.

The purpose was to underpin an ideological platform with *political* and *institutional* impacts, to later strengthen the revolutionary political project through *social* and *cultural* effects. This strategy responded to the need to replace the Bureaucratic State and prepare the ground for the consolidation of the *Revolutionary State*, all supported by PDVSA, whose contributions contributed to financing the implementation of the system, promoting the creation of organizations and financing entities characterized by opacity on their operation, as they are not subject to legal-institutional control<sup>10</sup>. This strategy led to the loss of its initial momentum, going from being a mechanism of attention and inclusion, which would close the political and economic gap, to being an instrument of political, social and institutional control for the deepening of the revolution<sup>11</sup>.

The development of the *revolutionary* proposal has continued its aspiration to consolidate *People's Power*, the name by which the package of organic laws passed in December 2010 is known. After the loss of the ruling party majority in the legislative elections,

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10 Cabezas, Luis Francisco, and D'Elia, Yolanda, "*La Política Social en Venezuela*" (ILDIS, July 2008), <https://library.fes.de/opus4/frontdoor/index/index/docId/11681>, 10.

11 Cabezas, Luis Francisco, and D'Elia, Yolanda, "*La Política Social en Venezuela*" (ILDIS, July 2008), <https://library.fes.de/opus4/frontdoor/index/index/docId/11681>, 14.

the assembly sanctioned the following legal instruments: Law of People's Power, Law of Communes, Law of the Communal Economic System, Law of Public and Communal Planning and Social Comptrollership. Within the so-called *communal State* built on the notion of People's Power, the reform of the Organic Law of Municipal Public Power was included, as well as the Laws of the State Councils for Planning and Coordination of Public Policies and of the Local Councils of Public Planning<sup>12</sup>.

The progressive dismantling of democratic institutions had resisted the authoritarian advance with the opposition's victory in the 2015 legislative elections, while the Attorney General's Office, the National Electoral Council and the Supreme Court of Justice continued to fuel the erosion of the institutionality of the country. The Supreme Court continues to be one of the most discredited institutions in the country, as it is a tool that the regime has not hesitated to use to advance in the consolidation of an authoritarian system where the dominant faction eliminates any challenge to its power. The convocation of the Constituent National Assembly in 2017 reminded society that the regime not only controls the narrative but also has no limits to the authoritarian exercise of power.

The approval –under questionable circumstances– of the Constituent National Assembly in 2017 renewed the expectations of People's Power, approving in April 2019 the Constituent Law of the Homeland Plan (Plan de la Patria) as a legislative framework

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12 Brewer-Carías Allan R., “La inconstitucional creación de un «estado comunal del poder popular» en Venezuela y la desconstitucionalización del Estado de derecho,” [allanbrewercarias.com](https://allanbrewercarias.com) (Allan Brewer-Carías, September 14, 2011), <https://allanbrewercarias.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/1088-1035...-Brewer.-LA-CREACION-DEL-ESTADO-COMUNAL-Y-LA-DESCONSTITUCIONALIZACION-DEL-ESTADO-DE-DERECHO-EN-VENE.pdf>.

to advance its implementation. However, it was not until 2021 that the National Assembly, with an official majority, approved the Organic Law of Communal Cities and the Organic Law of the Communal Parliament in their first discussion, reintroducing the debate on the communal State. Although the objectives of consolidating the communal State have not been fully achieved, it remains a threat that is used strategically and that has also managed to advance in the institutional erosion as an instrument of the parallel State<sup>13</sup>, making traditional political decision-making and representation structures increasingly irrelevant, both because of financial suffocation and the ability to allocate the very scarce resources that the central government grants to them.

This behavior of progressive deinstitutionalization has been vital for the national government to consolidate a system free of institutional controls, fundamental in the arbitrary exercise of power to achieve higher political objectives such as its preservation. Alternation has been replaced by persistence thanks to institutions moved by the same interests as the Executive, which publicly declare their adherence to the Bolivarian political project<sup>14</sup>, thereby limiting plural representation and collective participation as they are subject to the political control of the ruling party.

The critical situation post-Chavismo Venezuela is going through represents an enormous setback, not only politically

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13 Casal, Jesús María, “¿Qué Implica El Relanzamiento Del Estado Comunal?”, Prodavinci (Prodavinci, August 9, 2021), <https://prodavinci.com/que-implica-el-relanzamiento-del-estado-comunal/>.

14 “General aclara postura pro-gobierno de la Fuerza Armada,” *Voz de América* (Voz de América, July 15, 2014), <https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/venezuela-rumores-golpe-militares-politica-wilmer-padrino-nicolas-maduro/1957129.html>.



and economically but, above all, socially. A country that, having been one of the primary oil producers in the world and that for decades had one of the most stable democracies in Latin America, is plunged into a deep crisis that continues to threaten the region's stability. The United Nations has recognized that there are "remains" of democracy to save. Meanwhile, the country continues to be a victim of the disregard of the constitutional order (with the creation of parallel organizations, such as the Constituent National Assembly and the communal State), as our democratic institutions and procedures are undermined, taking away autonomy from political subjects, its citizens, preventing the democratic exercise of the election of their government.

### **Final reflections: popular power and authoritarian consolidation**

The *Socialist Revolution of the 21st Century* proposed to bring participatory democracy to sectors that had historically remained excluded during more than forty years of democracy. Hugo Chávez's rise to power meant the abandonment of bipartisanship after a long crisis that dragged down not only the political parties and the status quo but also the political system itself, to the point that it was within his elite that Chávez found political and financial support for his electoral candidacy in 1998. The dismantling of representative democracy was necessary to allow participatory democracy to replace it. However, Chavismo chose to build its political structure on the existing institutional foundations, thus feeding a *hyperbureaucratized* system that would inevitably lead to the creation of a parallel state. This alternative institutionality exacerbated the clientelism, cronyism and corruption that already existed but which were necessary to undermine democratic institutions and force dependency towards a new institutionality

to redistribute income, only with new political, economic and social actors who would become the new elites.

This process of institutional change began with the *Plan Bolívar 2000*<sup>15</sup>, a social intervention program carried out by the military that would inaugurate the close link with civilians, extending throughout the state bureaucracy. With broad participation in key political decision-making, the military institution assumed responsibilities for its implementation with the justification of providing relief to the country's crisis<sup>16</sup>. This has been a recurrent argument throughout the construction of the new revolutionary institutions, a constant allusion to the emergency, to the temporary or transitory, to introduce authoritarian mechanisms of a permanent nature.

The road to an authoritarian regime, following the definition of Mainwaring and Pérez Liñán<sup>17</sup> would have been impossible without the participation of the Armed Forces. Their role has been central to the advancement of the Chavista authoritarian model. However, the dismantling of the institutional framework for democracy has been the responsibility of both Hugo Chávez, who built his political project taking advantage of the weaknesses of the system that he tried to overthrow with the 1992 coup, and Nicolás Maduro, executor of his political will. In any case, military institutions have served as support by getting involved in dismantling democratic institutions first, to later serve as support in the imposition of the new institutions as a repressive

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15 Trinkunas, Harold, "The Military. From Marginalization to Center Stage," in *The Unraveling of Representative Democracy in Venezuela* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 51.

16 [http://www.poderopedia.org/ve/organizaciones/Plan\\_Bolivar\\_2000](http://www.poderopedia.org/ve/organizaciones/Plan_Bolivar_2000)

17 Mainwaring, Scott and Pérez-Liñán Anibal, *Democracies and Dictatorships in Latin America: Emergence, Survival, and Fall* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 114.

apparatus. Finding himself with a set of weakened institutions that showed clear signs of exhaustion, in addition to the pressure of a frustrated middle class that cut ties with the political elite and the system in charge of consolidating democracy, Chávez set out to dismantle not only said system but the very idea of the republic. The new communal institutionality aspires to get rid of the representative institutions and political control, disregarding the separation of powers and the system of checks and balances, through an assembly system controlled by the National Executive without the mediation or control of other autonomous bodies. The danger of political-institutional fragmentation is that it can easily become a vehicle towards anarchy, facilitating the inevitable consolidation of an autocratic regime.

Finally, and recognizing the authoritarian nature of this political dynamic, preserving the spaces of democratic representation indicated by the 1999 Constitution itself is a permanent task. Political disaffection must be combated with the determined demand for a plural and democratic representation in the face of the advancement of a political model that ignores the mechanisms of representation and participation (individual and collective). However, this defense cannot rest exclusively on political parties or civil society. Coordination between both actors is necessary to face the (final?) onslaught of the communal State, which has become an instrument of punishment when political power feels threatened by the capacity for articulation between the population (the repetition of the election in Barinas can be an indicator). The task of organizing and growing in the search for greater associativity is possibly the scenario most feared by authoritarian regimes, hence their effort to break and fragment democratic actors and their agenda.

# Rafael Ramírez Colina: "Problems do not wait for the democratic fabric and the institutional framework to be rebuilt; people need solutions"

Pedro Pablo Peñaloza

The mayor of Maracaibo sweats. And not only because of the high temperatures in the capital of Zulia. Rafael Ramírez Colina must strive to maintain an institutional relationship with the Nicolás Maduro regime, offer solutions to a city in ruins and, in turn, promote the fight for democratic transition in the country. A lot of work.

He is some sort of tightrope walker. In his visits to the communities, he does not forget discourses but is obliged to emphasize solutions. Just as he achieves understanding with the central authorities, he remains committed to national change from his party, Primero Justicia. He faces the threat of the ruling party and the criticism of those who confuse dialogue with collaboration.

If he makes a false step, the sword of Damocles that he carries above him will surely fall. However, he affirms: "What is certain is that one cannot remain paralyzed".

–How can you be a democratic mayor under an authoritarian regime?

Understanding that your function is to serve the people so that they strengthen democratic values. We are convinced that if you are building or rebuilding the institutionality in your space, which in my case is the municipality, in some way, you are strengthening the democratic branches that society should not have lost. Consequently, you can move forward with the solidity of institutional support to consolidate management beyond the relationship you have to have with national organizations. In this sense, what must be done is to strengthen our institutions at the municipal level so they can be like a shield against authoritarian abuses.

–Taking stock after the election, some say that the opposition won a mayor but lost a political leader. What do you think of this statement?

I think it's the opposite. I think about our case in Maracaibo. We received a city that was literally devastated. And when you enter management, and people start to make contrasts, it is not only that you get strengths as a manager, but you get them as a leader because people feel that that's where they find a model that contrasts. The contrast allows you to tell people that you could do something different if you were in a different space.

What do I mean by this? Suppose you are working for the political change we are all looking for in 2024, and you do things well. In that case, you will be able to ask people for a favor at

that time to support you in a proposal for comprehensive change, understanding that they are going to contrast with the model they see in the city.

I do think that the daily discourse of being there as a political leader is lost a bit because, obviously, you are busy with the problems. When you go to the community, people listen to the political speeches, but they also want the solution to their problems. So, the speeches are reduced a little, but I am convinced there is much more you can do from a position like this, the Maracaibo mayor's office, to strengthen democracy or seek political change.

–Electoral participation fosters coexistence and cooperation. From a public official's perspective, you must support Maduro and vice versa. It is in your interest that Maduro's management be successful in your municipality for the good of the community. How do you manage this relationship when, at the same time, you are fighting for a democratic transition in Venezuela?

I believe that convenience is not when a ruler is doing well or poorly; it is when we can establish solution mechanisms that work for the people. Some people are wrong in believing that we are betting that the national government will do well because that translates into benefits for the city, and that is not necessarily the case. Oil prices are very high, and, nonetheless, not all the income that should go to our city is coming in. Consequently, we have an obligation to maintain an institutional relationship, which should never have been lost in democracy.

One of the values of democracy is alternation with different representations mature enough to understand that the institutional relationship is necessary. I think that was lost and to a point where established democrats believe that if that happens,

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it means that the ground is being surrendered, or that one is a collaborationist, or that we surrender or give up on principles. Nothing is further from reality than that.

The only way we have to show people that things are different is by professing by example. And the truth is that one of the things that November 2021 did show, at least in the case of Zulia, is that people are tired of the meaningless diatribe. Because you can have a fight for democracy like the one we have, which is very important, but in the end, the people are left stuck in the middle if they don't get some kind of solution from either side.

Problems do not wait for the democratic fabric and the institutional framework to be rebuilt; people need solutions, and, for that, measures have to be taken that allow harmonization with the institutional framework, where opportunities can be found to continue advancing in principles and values. We understand this clearly: we must make the country recover its path of opportunity and progress.

But it is not in the political diatribe from now until 2024 that we will get people to lean more towards us; it is by building a platform that is solid enough that, at the right time, it will help achieve the result that we are all waiting for.

—The actions of the mayor of Chacao, Gustavo Duque, in the case of the young people detained by the General Directorate of Military Counterintelligence (DGCIM), were widely criticized on social media. But what other choice did Duque have? If he does not "cooperate" with the Maduro regime, the police may intervene or go against him directly. What would you have done in that case?

I don't have the exact details of how it originated or the reason for the arrest. What we do know is that we are clear that we are respectful of rights. The right to protest in our country is enshrined in the Constitution. One has an institutional responsibility, but one also has constitutional rights to respect. We are convinced that peaceful protest is a natural right of any society because it is the way to channel a legitimate claim. As long as the protest is peaceful, we must guarantee that citizens can express themselves. Otherwise, it is anarchy, which is not convenient for any society because that does not build; it destroys.

–After the 2014 elections, the Chavista regime attacked a group of opposition mayors who ended up being dismissed, imprisoned, or exiled. Do those antecedents weigh when making decisions?

In a country where the institutional framework is fragile, everything one does must be duly thought out because, certainly, all decisions can be affected by political rationale. What is certain is that we cannot remain paralyzed; we make decisions every day, demand, and claim what we consider corresponds to us, and we are not going to stop doing it because our commitment to citizens is to fight for their rights.

From the day we launched the candidacy, we knew what we were going for. Now, one has to be consistent with things. If one is educated in democratic principles and believes that all the rights enshrined in the Constitution must be respected, one has to continue fighting for it.

Now, what shouldn't a mayor do? Being the captain of all the claims that exist regarding rights, because that is what parties, NGOs and organized civil society are for. When one gets into these positions, one knows that one is exposed to any circumstance, but



one is due to the people who elected us, who demand that you demand. In that commitment, we must do what corresponds to us for the benefit of our people.

–Juan Guaidó visited Maracaibo, and no photo was seen with you. Did you not meet because of political differences or fear of reprisals from Chavismo?

We did not meet because of our schedules. I didn't know he was in our state until his tour started. We have activities, and I already had a schedule with a full workload, and we couldn't cross schedules, but it's not due to political differences.

–The country has already entered a pre-electoral phase, where the Presidency of the Republic will be at stake. How much can the mayor of Maracaibo participate in this process without exposing himself to persecution and harassment from Miraflores?

Beyond being mayor of Maracaibo, I am a member of Primero Justicia. My party has a clear line of political change in the country, which I support. We will engage in our responsibility as political leaders, not as officials. In this responsibility, we will do what corresponds to us as a leader to organize our municipality sufficiently so that it actively participates in the search for that change.

We have a responsibility to the municipality, but we also have an obligation to our country, and we will exercise it. Part of reaching this municipal responsibility is understanding that people want a change in the municipality, and we are achieving it. Still, they also want a change in the destiny of the country where we all live. As this change occurs, we will be able to achieve the opportunity and progress that we do not have today.

# Conclusion

This issue seeks to contribute to the understanding of the Venezuelan decentralization process, its effects and how local power unfolds in a dictatorship.

To conclude, we will specify four ideas that we consider essential to describe this topic :

1. During the 20th century, multiple reforms and attempts were made to decentralize power in Venezuela, seeking a much more diverse vision and a political map with a more democratic configuration. At the legal level, this decentralization was even deepened with the 1999 Constitution. However, when the current political reality is observed, Venezuela is governed by an authoritarian regime that concentrates all the State's power in a central power. This regime removes and gives powers to regional and local powers based on a criterion of control and maintenance of power, and not on a democratizing criterion or in the search for progress in other regions.
2. The spaces of local power were windows to innovate in the way of doing politics. It is in these spaces that women like Gloria Lizárraga and Lolita Aniyar de Castro begin to grow politically and build an administration from mayors' and governors' offices. However, this growth is disrupted by the convulsive political situation that Venezuela begins to experience at the end of the century: attempted coups, protests and discontent towards political parties. Later, the effects of these last years of the 20th century for Venezuela

and the destruction of decentralization attempts started to be seen.

3. The Communal State seeks to fragment the association capacity of civil society. According to Puerta Riera, the new communal institutionality aspires to replace the representative system and to govern through an assembly system, without checks and balances and without an institutional system to slow it down, seeking greater ignorance of the institutions and driving political disaffection. The author concludes that the only antidote to this door to anarchy and social control will be the defense of the spaces of power and presentation granted in the National Constitution, provided that there is a real articulation between civil society and political parties.
4. According to Rafael Ramírez Colina, the mayors have a responsibility with the municipality and with Venezuela. Each public administrator will have the determination to exercise that responsibility or not in favor of a change for the destiny of the country, seeking to build the opportunity and progress that don't exist today in the nation.

We hope that this edition allows a better understanding of the challenges of decentralization in Venezuela, in the direction towards Democratization.

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