

Democratization



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Notes on political parties under an authoritarian system: the case of Venezuela

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It is commonplace to say that political parties are essential to democracy, but what about parties under an authoritarian system? Examining this question can be a useful theoretical exercise, but, in our case, it is a practical verification: Venezuela has ceased to be a pluralist system in every conceivable sense from the perspective of political and social sciences in recent decades, and this change has a piece of major evidence in the characterization of the party system that will be described in these notes, where we have decided to omit technical references from the relevant literature.

First, it is necessary to define briefly what a political party is. A party is a voluntary organization, ordered hierarchically and of a permanent nature, whose purpose is to compete for institutional power through elections, in order to update its general vision of reality in public policies and legislation. As it should be noted, this definition requires, to be effective in practice, a democratic environment or, as we would say with a certain political pedantry, polyarchic. We are referring to three elementary conditions: the freedom of people to associate and organize; the possibility for these individuals and their organization to express their views in the public sphere; and

the recognition of the legitimacy of its existence and action. These are basic elements, even prior to democratic standards for electoral processes.

The history of Venezuelan democracy, insofar as it is a history that had its delayed institutional realization only late in the 20th century, is the history of its political parties. Venezuelan society was, for various reasons, incapable of forging a minimally tolerant and liberal party dynamic in the 19th century, replacing the limited citizen-electoral established in the constitutions by the citizen-in-arms of *caudillismo*, in contrast to the aspirations of republican institutionalization and social progress that simultaneously fed our mentality as a nation. In the late 20th century, the youths that grew up in the shadow of Gómez authoritarianism created the first modern ideological organizations, and in the midst of vicissitudes, it is the statesmen who emerged there who agreed on the rules of what Professor Juan Carlos Rey called the “populist system of conciliation of elites”: the democracy of Puntofijo or of parties. Rey said that he was a “populist” because he was anchored in popular legitimation in free and regular elections, and in the “conciliation of elites” because he went through the discussion of public policies between divergent sectors, but with mutual recognition. The role of the parties –mainly the social democratic Acción Democrática and the Christian Democrat Copei– was essential in this scheme, but other parties were also of electoral and parliamentary relevance, given their popular support, their influence over institutional arrangements, the selection of public officials, and, in a way that is crucial, in the budgets and redistributive aspects derived from their programs, already moderated in a somewhat pragmatic ideological centrism. This led paradoxically to the situation in which the responsibility of the parties was associated, in its political cost, with the uses that society made of the resources and measures that the state leadership made.

This succinct historical account is not a mere digression. The Venezuelan political system was a partisan system, and the efficiency problems derived from the exhaustion of the rentier model, the moral failures of some administrations, and the paradoxical relevance derived from its general influence, led to a prolonged legitimacy crisis of its fundamental actors. This gave way to a growing disdain, especially among other elite sectors, towards its performance and authority. It was said in the eighties and nineties that ours was a suffocating state, and that its rigid hands were those of the parties: "State-of-parties", "partyocracy", "political class" were terms often heard among academic circles, analysts, and political and social competitors of that leadership, from all ideological extremes. The claim was that "decent" people did not get involved in "corrupt" politics. Chavismo, which was originally a coalition of anti-liberal left and right elements (although eventually they would be the first to acquire defining importance), arrived in this context at the end of the system. It was the era of anti-politics, anti-partisanship and "neo-populism".

The political system that emerged with significant support from the electorate –although with significant electoral abstention– in 1999 was negatively defined as a correction of a "rotten partyocracy". The late President Hugo Chávez came forth with a "movement" to clean up politics. With the National Constituent Assembly overwhelmingly dominated by a single organization, a new social arrangement was drawn up. The 1999 Constitution is essentially anti-party: although it formally maintains the freedoms of association, expression and assembly, it reduces parties to the euphemism of "associations for political purposes" and, by reducing the powers of the legislative power, it also reduces the natural forum of parties and its powers. The parties in the constitutional text were replaced by civil society, which would quickly be disregarded in the practice of Chavismo by the myriad iterations of the so-called popular power, either as a collective aspiration of the supporters of the revolution, or as a

State bureaucratized co-option. They demanded the dismantling of "representative democracy" (partisan, bourgeois and false) and its replacement by "participatory democracy" (true and popular).

It must be said then that the founding moment of the present political system, although it had an important majority democratic legitimacy derived from the charismatic support for the figure of Hugo Chávez, with important electoral victories especially since 1999, lacked the elements of pluralist recognition and openness typical of a liberal democracy. It went from an "illiberal democracy", with the majority subjugation of dissident minorities (defined as "oligarchies"), to a system of "competitive authoritarianism" in which the charismatic leader allowed some electoral freedoms, until arriving at a clear authoritarian system under Nicolás Maduro's administrations. But make no mistake: in its hybridization between popular support and authoritarianism, it cannot be mistaken for a pluralist system and, therefore, it has had constant hostility towards political parties, their deployment and their action.

To review the evolution of political parties in the two decades of the Chavista political system is to see the ups and downs of the Venezuelan democratic dissidence, and the history of its opposition, but also that of a relative establishment –not institutionalization– of a State-party, from the Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) to the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). What has this journey been like?

Let's start by describing the dynamics of the opposition and its parties. In 1999, the confusion of the party leaders led to a kind of retreat, welcomed by the elites: AD and Copei almost reduced to their minimum expression, and the alternative national opposition party, Proyecto Venezuela, had not been consolidated yet. Although some local and regional positions were maintained in the electoral process of 2000, the opposition leadership in the early years of Chavismo was

concentrated in civil society organizations, mainly Fedecámaras, the Confederación de Trabajadores de Venezuela, and Gente del Petróleo, as well as the main private media. The opposition parties lagged behind, and were led to a series of compromises and tactics that minimized their effectiveness, despite consistently obtaining around 40% of electoral support atomized into various groups. As of 2006, with the presidential candidacy in coalition of Manuel Rosales, the nucleus of the Venezuelan opposition was formed in the following decade and a half: the new parties Un Nuevo Tiempo (UNT, emerged from a regional split of AD) and Primero Justicia (PJ, emerged from independent activists from civil society), AD, Copei, Proyecto Venezuela, La Causa Radical, among others, joined in to form various alliances that, transcending their differences in the ideological spectrum, settled in their position of trying to stop the authoritarian advance in the country and offer an electoral alternative with the *Mesa de la Unidad Democrática* (MUD) from 2009. That 40% of diffuse support was consolidated to a gradual but sustained growth: 46% was achieved in the 2010 parliamentary elections (breaking the third-party barrier in parliament), there was also an increment in the 2012 and 2013 presidential elections led by Henrique Capriles, ups and downs in the regional elections and advance in local elections, and of course the success of the parliamentarians in 2015, with 56% of the votes –to date, the highest volume of absolute votes received by any coalition in the electoral history of Venezuela. With its highs and lows, the parties that made up the MUD (to which we should add Voluntad Popular, the progressive division of PJ and UNT) had managed to consolidate their own leadership, regional presences and processes of formation of cadres, with advances especially notorious thanks to their electoral tactic. This is just as or more meritorious when considering the challenging circumstances of a system hostile towards pluralism.

Since Chavismo has been in power, the MVR and later the PSUV have remained as the dominant and even hegemonic partner of the various iterations of the Polo Patriótico formed in 1998, and which has dominated Venezuelan electoral politics since the practice of the majority delegation of the first Chavismo, with the development of a growing electoral authoritarianism, especially in the 2010s. But beyond its successes at the polls, mediated by a combination of genuine popularity and patronage, it is the PSUV's inscription as a State-party that draws attention. In Venezuela, there were hegemonic parties derived from a popular revolution that took over the state (such as the historic Yellow Liberal Party, or even the AD of the triennium 1945-1948) and party organizations promoted more or less clumsily from the executive power (such as Medina's PDV or Perez Jimenez's FEI), but only the PSUV has merged itself with the national state in such a way that it is sometimes impossible to distinguish one from the other. Certainly, Chavismo has organized networks of political participation parallel to the ruling party (from the *Círculos Bolivarianos* to *Somos Venezuela*), but after the purge of reformist sectors of the MVR between 2001 and 2004, the PSUV was born as an attempt from the Presidency to organize a single party as of 2005, when Hugo Chávez declared that the Bolivarian revolution was henceforth a socialist revolution. Unlike AD and Copei, the maximum leader of the party has always been the President of the Republic, while the physical spaces of the State –and public spaces in general– have not only served for non-governmental partisan activity exclusive of said awning, but also the party's membership had been founded both with the compulsive mobilization of public administration officials and with the political-electoral use of the social assistance programs developed from its apparatus. Moreover, individuals who have been militants of this organization have been selected as magistrates in the citizen, judicial and electoral powers in defiance of the constitutional nonpartisan mandate. Thus, the PSUV is a robust national party

today to the extent that it takes on the deployment of the State itself, the latter assuming the programmatic goals of the former.

These processes run parallel to the end of the charismatic stage of Chavismo, and the authoritarian deployment of the stage led by Nicolás Maduro, a continuation of the repressive advances on civil liberties that characterized the 2000s, but with less ostensible popular support, and an even more pronounced use of state coercion. Advantageous electoral rules and ignorance of adverse election results, control over public opinion and the media, non-recognition of social and political organizations adverse to the executive, as well as restrictions on the autonomous deployment of the productive forces, originated with significant social support under the presidency of Hugo Chávez. This all has been aggravated by the rise of Maduro. The annulment of electoral partisan alternatives has been promoted since his early mandate, as well as the paralyzing radicalization of opposition politics.

What is the current situation? The features of the party system today are the features that correspond to a party system in an authoritarian system, where a democratic opposition is tactically debated between loyalty to a system of rules unfairly abused by the Executive, and anti-insurrectionary outlets. In turn, in a system of this nature, the hegemonic state-party is torn between being a single party or allowing an opposition ranging from ineffective to fictitious.

Table N° 1
National Political Alliances and Status of their Member
Parties - Venezuelan Elections 2020

Legal and participants	
<i>Gran Polo Patriótico</i> (Government representation))	PSUV - SOMOS VENEZUELA - PPT ■ - TUPAMARO ■ UPV - ORA ■ - MEP - PODEMOS - Alianza Cambio
<i>Alianza Revolucionaria Popular</i> (Dissident left)	PCV - (TUPAMARO) ■ - (PPT) ■
<i>Venezuela Unida</i> (2020 Parliamentary Usurpation Parties)	Venezuela Unida ■ - PJ Primero Venezuela ■ VP ■
<i>Alianza Democrática</i> (National Negotiation Table, and Allies)	AP - Copei ■ - AD ■ - Cambiemos ■ Movimiento Ecológico - El Cambio ■
<i>Not Aligned</i>	Soluciones ■ - (Redes) ■ - MAS - ProCiudadanos ■ - UPP89 - Unión Popular MPD - Fuerza del Cambio
Illegalized and/or non-participants in the election	
MUD ■ - (PJ) - (AD) - UNT - (VP) - Causa Radical ■ Movimiento Progresista - Alianza del Lápiz - Cuentas Claras Proyecto Venezuela ■ - Vente Venezuela ■ - Gente Emergente Alianza Bravo Pueblo ■ - Puente ■ - Encuentro Ciudadano ■ ■ Marea Socialista ■	

Notes:

■ Appointment of Board by the TSJ - Leadership in Dispute

■ It did not exist for the previous electoral process

■ Disabled or Extinct

(...) Original Organization

■ Competing with candidates on the Communist Party list

■ Banned for Registration

This is verified in practice, while maintaining a timidly pluralistic constitutional framework, by a deployment of regulations, laws, judicial and administrative decisions that limit opposition party action and former allies of Chavismo through measures such as:

- Zealous oversight of political organizations' private financing, with persecution of private donors and the prohibition of public financing to them;
- Establishment and exacerbation of rules for the adjudication of positions that favor the first electoral minority in legislative bodies;
- Impossibility or denial of formal registration of dissident organizations (e.g. Vente Venezuela and Marea Socialista);
- Suspension, invalidation or illegalization of coalitions and political organizations in retaliation for their political strategies (e.g. MUD, PJ, VP, AD, among others) (see Table N ° 1);
- Disqualification, exiles, arrests, and even imprisonment of the main leaders of these parties, as well as a significant number of their elected representatives;
- Cooptation and corruption of opposition media leaders, either in favor of their formal adherence to Chavismo, or for the engulfment of dissident parties;
- Imposition of parallel party authorities by the judiciary (Copei, AD, PJ, VP, Patria Para Todos, Tupamaro);
- Physical attacks and invasions of national, regional and local headquarters of political parties;

- Dissolution and constant threat to the formation and activities of the youth and grassroots party cadres, especially in communities considered as Chavista “turfs”.

As this has occurred, the opposition's electoral growth trend has been frustrated by successive waves of repression by the State, reaching its exacerbation in the questionable parliamentary electoral process of 2020. With this, the advances of partisan institutionalization, and the conditions for the deployment of democratic political activity can hardly be evaluated as if they occurred within a democratic system. Not only in regard to the relationship of the parties vis a vis the State, but also to their internal processes: the dynamics of election of authorities, formation of cadres and local activism are affected by this constant harassment, and by the almost effective suspension of regular political life.

Framing this electoral process in the authoritarian scheme described above, the resulting party system has a dynamic alien to democratic pluralism. While one cannot formally speak of a one-party system, for all practical purposes the PSUV has achieved this historic end. The existing parliamentary opposition in fact corresponds to opposition parties that have accepted the disadvantageous rules, or that have directly benefited from their application for the control of organizations in an undue way, and for obtaining positions in national representation. Additionally, even with the possibility that the parliamentary opposition in fact assumed a differentiating policy from the Executive, its ability to do so is diminished by the electoral rules that allowed a loose occupation of parliament by the PSUV, in which little more than 60% of the votes served to take more than 90% of the seats, making it impossible for any political incidence that these groups could aspire to. Outside of parliament, the electoral authoritarianism measures of the cycle that began in 2017 have also made it possible to reverse, with relatively minority

popular support, the local and regional presence of opposition leaders and representation in Legislative Councils, Mayors and Municipal Councils. It is debatable whether this is enhanced by the electoral boycott from the traditional opposition, but the truth is that the political organizations identified with it, including its coalition, operate in a sort of semi-secrecy.

These circumstances, which reveal a relative weakness of the opposition parties, and tactical fractures derived from the repressive cycle, generate conditions that hinder the possibility of strategic coordination in the medium term, with the establishment of rules that are not merely the repetition of informal arrangements. These conditions can be summarized as: a) mistrust within the dissident leadership; b) the discouragement of a progressive electoral dynamic; c) the appeal to maximalist tactics on the basis of premises not verified in reality; d) the demoralization of middle and grassroots cadres, especially at the regional and local level; e) the discursive differentiation of a “national opposition” and an “opposition in exile”, which tend to be increasingly internalized.

Even in the midst of an open repressive climate, and with persecution measures in full force, there are some positive aspects that we wish to highlight. In the first place, the ideological conviction of the value of political pluralism and the restoration of republican institutionalism remains largely among the Venezuelan opposition dissent, without having yet spread the bitter conviction of the inevitability of authoritarian systems as a fatal destiny. Second, there is a growing willingness to regroup forces, to stand up to the abusive state power from local and regional spaces where an aspiration for change is established by the majority, regardless of the factions that encourage it. Finally, the tenacious will of leading cadres and militants of democratic organizations throughout the country, as well as young people and independent citizens, to join the tasks of reconstruction

and political organization, in a relationship of respect and contact with the comrades affected by exile and persecution.

As was established in the beginning, the life of Venezuelan democracy has been the life of its parties. And the life of the parties is the life and commitment that their members contribute voluntarily. At other times in history, the possibilities of effective opposition action were forbidden by law and the abuse of power. At other times in history, society has managed to generate organizations from within that keep alive the flame of the pluralist, democratic and republican aspiration.

Conclusion: organization, unity, and representation

The tenth issue of *Democratización* ends. It was dedicated to the study of political representation and featured articles by Tomás Straka, Héctor Briceño, Guillermo Aveledo Coll and Pedro Pablo Peñaloza. By way of conclusion, we share three ideas that can contribute to the analysis of the current moment:

1. **Organization and representation:** Tomás Straka, in “We, the Representatives”, establishes the relationship between organization, representation and legitimacy. The author highlights that those who carried the weight of our independence on their shoulders faced anarchy and tyranny by resorting to tools of territorial political organization –Congresses– that allowed the creation of formal mechanisms of representation –the vote– that gave political legitimacy to the triumphs achieved with arms. This legacy of our national history reaffirms the importance of political organization as a ferment of real representation that can offer legitimacy to the actors and their decisions. This key can be useful when those who today usurp power in Venezuela have hijacked our right to choose and we face the challenge of promoting a real representation that rescues the mechanisms –the vote– that allow the democratic system to recover.
2. **Mechanisms of representation:** Héctor Briceño, in “Society, parties and elections: how to rebuild political representation?”, described the autocratic advance of

the Chavista revolution in electoral matters. The author explains that after the parliamentary defeat of 2015, the Nicolás Maduro regime further limited the conditions of electoral justice and Venezuela became a traditional, closed, or hegemonic dictatorship (depending on the political terminology that you want to use). This autocratic consolidation took away our vote and has meant a substantial setback in our democratic tradition. In this sense, Chavismo has turned out to be a leapfrog for more than 200 years in our republican history, and the democratic forces in Venezuela today fight for the same thing that the “representatives of 1811” defended: the right to choose and own our own destiny.

3. **Unity and representation:** Urgent calls to rebuild the unity of the opposition are frequently heard in everyday, academic and political environments. Certainly, it is urgent to join forces to resist and, as far as possible, to advance in the liberation of our country. However, after twenty years of the Chavista dictatorship and considering the current situation in Venezuela, it is convenient to ask ourselves about the foundation of unity and its scope. I do not pretend to be exhaustive in this reflection, but I place this premise on the table: the recomposition of the unit must be accompanied by the reconstruction of the capacity for political representation of the forces that comprise it, with organization and political formation as the main working tools. If the institutions that make up the unit are empty shells that do not represent the wishes of the country, the agreements reached will be artificial and will not be reciprocated with obedience by the entire society. Without real representation, there will hardly be efficient unity.