



Democratization

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after twenty-two years of the Chavista
revolution

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Time of dispersion, time of alliances

Edgardo Mondolfi Gudat

I have been invited to share a few insights on what the performance of political parties between 1948 and 1957 could mean in the face of what the opposition is currently facing. Even more so, I have been invited to elucidate if, considering any reflection that could result from the challenges posed in these times characterized by dispersion and authoritarianism, there are lessons to be learned and taken into account when taking a look at what happened with the political forces that operated from the most absolute illegality, or from their virtual ban, during the period between 1948 and 1957. In short, I understand that I have been invited to offer an outlook on the case of Venezuela from a historical perspective and on the basis of what our own path as a society could reveal.

At first glance, there could be seductive elements given supposed similarities between both scenarios. The first and most evident of all is that we see ourselves witnessing, as we did between 1948 and 1957, the dispersion of democratic forces due to the pressure exerted by the regime. The second similarity is dictated by the same question that, between those years, those who acted from exile, clandestinity or symbolic and moral opposition (in the style of the Copei party) had to ask themselves: how to break atomization?

The third similarity, if we can speak under those terms, is offered by the panorama itself: we are, much as the opposition during the 48-57 period, in an absolute state of weakness. A weakness that in that moment was strongly determined by the inherited type of interrelation, the one developed during the 45-48 triennium, marked by the commonly called "sectarianism", "cannibalism" –a term used by Rómulo Betancourt– or, using a less anthropophagic but still biological expression, determined by the phagocytizing of the rest of the political organizations, therefore reducing the role of political parties to a simple zero-sum game in electoral competition. A weakness that today relies on the existence of strategies that do not exactly agree with each other or that even look diametrically opposed. However, as we will see, those who were involved in such processes in 48-57 also faced that same kind of problem, in addition to the one just mentioned: their propensity, almost suicidal, to put into practice virulence and ideological exclusivism without noticing what it amounted to an annihilation of the dynamics built from October 18, 1945 or, if seen under a brighter light, the self-depredation of the democratic system.

Yet, from here on out, or beyond these apparent similarities, the risks involved in such an exercise begin to manifest themselves. Because, in history, there are no parameters, there are no prototypes or archetypes; history does not repeat itself nor is it cyclical. If this were the case, we could just cross our arms and wait for the beginnings of a new cycle to pass as if it were a procession passing before us. To a large extent, the problem would then be solved. But history is made and written by the people, and we do so in response to the requests and claims of our own environment, our own circumstances and our own specificities dictated by the present time.

Now, if this were a matter of offering lessons, and without knowing after all how useful they might be, I would propose focusing on two blocks: we could call the first “time of dispersion and disunity” (1948-1957) and we could define the second as the “time of alliances and their consequences” based on what has happened during the quarter of a century after January 23, 1958. I must warn beforehand that I will dedicate myself much more to stressing the matters of the first block, because the latter is certainly well known.

Between 1948-1958 and today

Just as I have listed supposed similarities, the most logical thing would then be to enunciate three differences worthy of consideration for this analysis. The first of such differences is that, in 1948, the displacement of the ruling party, Acción Democrática, from power, due to -founded or unfounded- hegemonic claims despite the fact that it had been relegitimized after receiving 871,764 of the total votes cast (1,183,764) in the presidential elections of December 1947. On the other hand, challenges today derive from the attitudes of a ruling party that, although has been electorally preferred in more or less credible terms for more than twenty years, behaves like a regime to which political scientists have not ceased trying to define and redefine (“competitive authoritarianism”, “soft dictatorship”, “dictatorship of the 21st century”) based on the increasingly restrictive characteristics it exhibits.

The second difference is that, in 1958, the shortest tyranny in the history of Venezuela (1953-1958) was being defeated. Today, time continues to work in a dangerous way against us: the “democratic assets” that Venezuelan society managed to accumulate during the quarter century after 1958 have weakened

increasingly and more significantly, referring both to what might be the value or importance that Venezuelan society attributes to the parties, as well as to the reflexes and electoral exercises that society itself was able to build and strengthen from then on –that is, the democratic habits implanted in the Venezuelan imagination that, little by little, have been fading, especially for a society that had been unaccustomed to living under an authoritarian regime during forty years and was therefore caught off guard and did not know what to do or how to act, once the guarantees of democratic coexistence had eroded.

The third difference between 48-58 and today is that there is no democracy beyond the mere existence of parties, and we now understand that this is not the exclusive manifestation of democracy, differing from those who thought political parties to be the only capable instrument to channel citizen participation –since partisan organizations became popular during the Isaías Medina Angarita regime (1941-1945), and more so during the Revolutionary Government Junta (1945-1948). Today, as we well know, the reality is different: together with the parties, and faced with the same authoritarian drift, extra-partisan groups (civil society, non-governmental organizations, civil associations, whichever else) also take on political actions. Unfortunately, due to the powerful poison that anti-politics exudes, such groups have not always been clear that their role is not to replace the parties but to complement them and even to help them act in tune with the times. So today we have parties and civil society working as scattered foci within the same labyrinth.

As if none of this were enough, we must consider social networks as a part of the puzzle: in our times, it seems it is through those means that the course of politics is defined, thus

influencing, often in a harmful way, the decisions to be taken by the opposition leadership.

The parties and their dynamics: 1948-1957

Starting in 1948, the Provisional Boards tried to assess what “order” and “tranquility” meant for a society that had faced the experiences of “instability” and “improvisation” (locally named as “bochinche”) attributed to the 45-48 triennium. It thus devoted itself to reorganizing the security services and the repressive-judicial apparatus. Nonetheless, it was not until the five-year period of the one-person regime of Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1953-1958) that political parties were completely pulverized. Equally importantly, it further delegitimized them before society as holding them responsible for the degree of pugnacity experienced between 1945 and 1948.

The parties demonized by the military regime were Democratic Action (AD) and the Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV) –active since the times of Medina Angarita–, and COPEI and URD –direct children of “*Octobris*”–. Together they would make up the “ring” that defined the ups and downs of the democratic game during the 45-48 triennium. It should be noted that they would not be the only parties (after all, around 13 different organizations would coexist during the democratic triennium), but they would be the most important ones and those that would ultimately persist despite all the vicissitudes, subjects to changing fates, for the rest of the 20th century.

The PCV, since the overthrow of Rómulo Gallegos in November 1948, would seek to ally itself in any way possible with AD, proscribed as was the organization commanded by Rómulo Betancourt, by decree of the Military Junta, since December 7 of that same year. However, according to his biographer, Ocarina

Castillo, the attitude exhibited by Carlos Delgado Chalbaud at the head of that first Board left the PCV quite alive, including its official spokesperson, the newspaper Tribuna Popular, despite having exhibited a precarious legality until then and, much more, despite a not muffled persecution unleashed against its leaders and militants. These events took place until March 1950, when the PCV was dragged into the oil strike, a sector within which AD continued to lead at the level of its unions even after it was dismantled as a party and went on to operate clandestinely.

As of the oil strike of March 1950, the communists fell, according to some of their own leaders, in the trap of an adventure, something that ended up dragging them to favor a tactic that would be seen as a “follow-up” against AD. Furthermore, as Manuel Caballero observes, some even pointed out that during that oil strike adventure there was little “proletarian insurrection” and, instead, a lot of “putsch”, as was to the liking of their “enemy brothers” in AD. The case was that, from then on, since the Board’s decree dates from March 13, 1950, PCV was completely outlawed and forced, like AD, to lead operations in a most hermetic secrecy.

For its part, AD itself, probably because it was the party most affected by the events of November 48, was the one that most quickly and resolutely opted in favor of a strategy of agitation and even of an insurrectionary type in alliance with certain military sectors. This occurred with particular determination between 1948 and 1952. We are talking, in short, of conspiratorial skirmishes that took place under the initiative or, at least, the acquiescence of the party. Furthermore, in terms of weapons and money, these conspiracies tried to be supported by the contributions of some governments related to AD in Costa Rica, Guatemala, Mexico and Cuba.

The years 1948-1952 supposed many vicissitudes for AD confronted within the conspiratorial terrain, generating, in light of what documents reveal, dispersion of the military groups committed to that partisan organization and increasing the dangers of leakage, not to mention the difficult coordination that must have taken place between AD's top national leadership in exile and the internal clandestine apparatus. This would make the disagreements tangible and cause tensions, tears and entanglements between both sides of the organization, that is, between those who were abroad and those who conspired within. An example of the commitment of certain military groups to AD would be the frustrated uprising of the Boca del Río air base, in the state of Aragua, which led the government to take greater measures within the barracks; or the death of one of its main promoters, Captain Wilfrido Omaña, as well as the murder in Barranquilla of Lieutenant León Droz Blanco. The balance of that experience (1948-1952) was that it left the AD cadres totally decimated. Never as during that period did the party have to bleed so much, leaving behind its enormous harvest of martyrs, and never being able to effectively coordinate any civil-military uprising.

The third party that is part of this synthesis is URD, always too dependent on the personal prestige of someone who was not precisely among the founding members of the organization but who quickly took over its leadership: Jóvito Villalba. Villalba's small and lax organization experienced its best and worst moment in November 1952, when it accepted the challenge of measuring itself in the elections to form a National Constituent Assembly.

The fourth party is COPEI, which would also participate in the 52 consultation and which had already shaken off the fame of being –as its opponents never tired of riveting– a “confessional”

party to proclaim itself as what it actually was: an Octobrist party. As or more relevant during the interregnum of silence that would take hold from 1952, COPEI continued to increase, from its sinuous or discreet opposition to the military regime in the face of its interrelation with the rest of the proscribed or semi-proscribed organizations, the same preaching it had had since such low degrees of political communication were recorded during the triennium. All this was synthesized by COPEI in the idea of conciliation (especially social), in the need to privilege the presence of intermediate associations (as a way to avoid the total omnipresence of the party before society) and in the desire to promote the de-ideologization of the debate. In this sense, as it had already tried to do between 1946 and 1948, COPEI exhibited a much more elaborate platform, technically speaking, than the rest of the political organizations. Furthermore, many of the elements that would later inform the future Puntofijo Pact found their origin in these ideas advocated by Rafael Caldera's party.

The electoral strategy (1952/1957)

Prior to discussing the relevant changes that took place in the year 1957, their meaning, and the reasons why it was so, it is useful to review a fact hardly ever mentioned: the different attempts to form an alliance or some kind of front, inside and outside the electoral field. Even when such understandings did not bear fruit in practice, they did not cease to act as valuable incentives when trying to propose the 1957 electoral strategy. The first of these antecedents is constituted, in order of importance, by the call made by the regime of the Second Board for the election of a National Constituent Assembly (ANC) on November 30, 1952, to approve a constitution that would replace that of 47, but circumscribing in advance the powers of those who were elected to this sole task. However, the mere approval of such Electoral

Statute would lead the different organizations to examine how to influence the process. In reality, all of them would propose to do so, including the two that were strictly prohibited from participating, AD and PCV, as they had been dissolved by decree of the First Junta (1948; where the second dated from 1950). So, only two parties formed the opposition: URD and COPEI.

It is often forgotten, or overlooked, as Diego Bautista Urbaneja observes, that it was barely four years and nine months since Venezuelans had last voted, as the vast majority did, in favor of Gallegos. The truth is that they had not forgotten how to do it and that posed a problem for this Board chaired by the colorless representative of the civil sector, Guillermo Suárez Flamerich. It is also often overlooked that Villalba, as the main candidate on the URD, was able to lead a contagious and dynamic campaign despite abuse and intimidation, and in which communist militants were up to their necks. Perhaps all the parties were willing to influence but not necessarily give express instructions to their respective militancies in order for them to go out to vote.

Such was the case of AD, which, incidentally, never basically drew up an openly abstentionist strategy, even when it was reluctant to face this electoral call. But, whatever that may have been, and even if there was no clear position in favor of abstention prior to the elections, the attitude of the party leadership was equally divided between those that insisted from exile not to participate in such a process and those leading the internal apparatus who believed it was local militancy who should decide. The result was that the same hundreds of thousands of *adecos* who almost five years earlier had voted for their party came out *en masse* for the URD card. As Margarita López Maya points out, it was only after the results appeared reflecting the strength of an important citizen participation, and a more important vote in

favor of URD and COPEI, that Betancourt and the rest of the high command abroad favorably interpreted what happened.

According to Manuel Caballero, it is important to note that this time, and united in their own way, the semi-legal URD and COPEI, and the illegal AD and PCV, managed to inflict the most humiliating defeat on the regime in an election that sought to legitimize the government, using all the resources of power, including the advantage of its millionaire propaganda and the persecution of opposition electoral activists.

From that point on, and twisting the course of the results due to the great surprise of fraud, Pérez Jiménez obtained, in the end, his great constituent assembly, which, in addition to modifying the constitution, had to proclaim him in April 1953 as constitutional president for the period 1953-1958 after the Military High Command had appointed him as provisional president on December 2, 1952, the day on which the counting of votes in favor of the opposition was not made known. The deputies elected by URD and COPEI not only did not join the National Constituent Assembly (although a few turncoats would instead), but both Villalba and the URD high command were immediately thrown into exile.

COPEI would hardly come out alive from that experience. Soon after, it was placed out of the game but not before it swelled the remaining panorama of made up decimated or outlawed organizations. However, the "victory-defeat" (as Caballero calls it) that the elections of November 30, 1952, meant led the opposition arch to try to build, from then on, a certain type of alliance scheme, especially at the initiative of the clandestine PCV. It was done in December of that same year, constituting the so-called "Civic Action Committee" and, in April 1954, the

“National Front of Resistance”. Both, however, quickly became extinct in the face of the fierceness shown by the new president, Pérez Jiménez.

A feature in the Constitution fuels the dilemma

The regime, through its unoriginal National Constituent Assembly, metamorphosed the 1947 constitution at will, but for whatever reason it left in place the provision according to which the president should be elected by universal, direct and secret vote. In such case, the closest date to such a commitment was what was expected to be the new five-year period 1958-1963. For Pérez Jiménez, the provisional solution that the ANC gave him when he was inaugurated as president in April 1953 was enough for his first five years; what was foreseen thereafter by the reformed constitution was actually something else. In other words: his own constitution put Pérez Jiménez against a wall. Or, in fiery terms, a stone of overwhelming weight was placed around his neck.

This, obviously, led to the rectification of strategies, visions and perceptions on the part of the parties and their battered devices in hiding. A clear presidential-type electoral alternative was proposed. Gone were the two routes tested until then without any degree of success: abstention and insurrection. Party individualism was also left behind. The thesis that could be defined as a “peaceful solution” was born and, at the same time, its corollary: the thesis of unity. It was a change, according to Simón Alberto Consalvi, not easy to assimilate: after all, it was not simple to abandon the belief that the regime could only be defeated by the same formula with which it had taken over the country, that is, through violence. Nor was the idea easy to assimilate for the simple reason that, during all those years of resistance, the coup formula had dominated, as a habit and a reflex.

In January 1957, Rómulo Betancourt voiced a transcending proposal from New York. Faced with the quasi-hesitant announcement by the regime that presidential elections would be called, he said: "We believe that, in this year of 1957, it will be possible to find a peaceful, evolutionary, elective solution to the difficult juncture Venezuela has always been in, at the brink of explosion in the form of a violent collective upheaval". But, at the same time, there was no illusion or deceit: "This consultation, obviously, cannot be carried out (...) without the prior existence of a climate of public freedoms"¹. Hence, the prospects for a peaceful alternative, posed by the challenge of Pérez Jiménez's own constitution, led the opposition to galvanize itself around four specific demands: the granting of a broad amnesty, return of the exiled, the liberation of political prisoners and, last but not least, the removal of censorship on the written word.

Luis Herrera Campins made a call to repeat the 1952 feat from exile and in name of COPEI, but now in a corrected and expanded version. Hence, from Munich, the site of his exile, he launched the slogan "For a new November 30". It was a simple slogan, but it carried two important readings at the same time. The first was the most obvious: to take on the challenge of flooding the ballot boxes in order to embarrass the regime in the face of its own tricks; and the second had to do with the need to transmit calmness to Venezuelans, accustomed as it had been to living within the apparent economic boom of *perezjimenismo*. Hence, the slogan did not contain anything that could be associated with an attempt to stimulate popular insurrection. It was not betting in favor of attacks or insurrections, but on free elections.

Now, the case that most draws attention is PCV. Few looked inward as boldly as this party did. It was not without a lack of

¹ Own translation.

reasons that PCV ended up proudly raising the conclusions reached by the XIII Plenary of its clandestine Central Committee in February 57 since, if any party could pride itself on being inflexible and irreducible from the ideological point of view and doctrinaire, it was precisely PCV. Its general secretary, Pompeyo Márquez -alias, Santos Yorme- was in charge of presenting the Political Report. Both for the tone of severe criticism of the behavior described by the party in the past (when speaking of a policy that had only led to “adventurism”) and for being willing to relegate its doctrinal objectives in order to reach a consensus, the document ended up becoming a fundamental piece in resistance literature.

This willingness to defer their objectives led the communists to point out, among others, two very important things: First, that the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal struggle which had always characterized the organization should be subjected to the demands posed by a democratic revolution. Second, that this revolution could only be carried out if there was a front capable of integrating other forces such as the “national bourgeoisie”, the “liberals” and the “social Christians” in addition to the emblematic forces of which the fierce language of PCV always spoke (workers, peasants, intellectuals). The XIII Plenary expressed it thus. It alluded to sectors that could well have ascribed to the party were communists not atheists and under better circumstances. If this type of language did not facilitate union, there would hardly be another one capable of surpassing it in sincerity.

We know the rest well enough to see ourselves repeating history, including what is related to the formation of the Patriotic Board. The truth is that the fear of the consultation led to the idea of organizing a plebiscite that would allow Pérez Jiménez to measure himself without competitors, without campaign,

and without risks, according to Consalvi. This formula, as is also known, was not provided for in the constitution of 53 but came out of the depths of a top hat, as is proper for magicians. December 15, 1957, saw another electoral triumph for Pérez Jiménez, even though barely fifteen days separated him from the violence of January 1958, already announced on New Year's Eve of 1957 when the first military aviation units rose up.

As many other examples reveal, authoritarian regimes end up as hostages to their own illusions. Otherwise what Manuel Caballero points out would not be explained in the sense that the plebiscite of December 1957 was called to give Pérez Jiménez a supposed feeling of solidity, stability and, supposedly also, legitimacy, especially before the Armed Forces.

The consequences of the action

If I were to synthesize what January 23, 1958 meant, and even more so the subsequent quarter century, I would have to begin by pointing out that democracy was assumed from then on as a habit and not as an exception. In addition, aligned with Manuel Caballero, it could be stated that we have always celebrated, beyond the January 23 date itself, what was later on built with so much determination, even if not always with the necessary patience. This practically leaves the overthrow of Pérez Jiménez relegated to an anecdote for the same reasons stated: the shortest tyranny of the 20th century in Venezuela was defeated.

Secondly, Venezuela was not governed from then on by those who had not accepted the irreversible changes proposed as of October 18, 1945, although they did join the new *lopezcontrerista* and *medinista* governance agreements, and forces that acted as historical enemies of October 18 continued to compete electorally, just as *uslarismo* (although the sincerity of their commitment

could be doubted due to the ambiguous action described by Uslar himself from then on, especially after the verification of his tacit endorsement of the 1992 coup).

Thirdly, Venezuelan society was positively unaccustomed to living under authoritarian threat. It was possible to rage for five years with the certainty that, once elections came to be, the government could be charged without frights or fears.

Fourthly, even in the midst of the Cold War, communists were regarded with much less fear than in other latitudes due to their particular electoral vocation (in this case, we make only one exception: the section that would run between 1962 and 1967, when PCV was overwhelmed by its more radical side and chose the path of armed struggle).

To me, the fifth and sixth are the most relevant consequences, without subtracting importance to those stated above. On the one hand, parties and leaders shared the same series of postulates and principles (for example, a consensual oil policy or a common foreign policy) which spoke, as never before, of a shared national project. On the other hand, political cannibalism was extinguished once and for all (though I will leave this to the reader's judgment, considering we've recently come across cannibalistic practices once again in unimaginable ways). In this sense, what succeeded January 23rd was an example of a high degree of political engineering, because the common denominator that existed between the parties was extended to other forces acting within society when verifying governance arrangements. This also had a healthy socializing effect on the military sector in the face of its abusive influence in the recent past.

In this sense, the agreements were punctual and, using a less deprecatory word, also pragmatic. Furthermore, and just

as important, the debate was removed from any ideological virulence. The parties understood, in the face of their own past performance, that disagreement and competition was one thing, and quite another to prey and annul themselves on the basis of exclusive attacks. Therefore, an “agonistic” rather than an antagonistic system was installed, regulated by a series of rules (some formal, others informal) which were accepted as a common frame of reference.

The best example of deviation in the face of such conduct was when PCV ceased to exercise a “loyal” opposition within the democratic system to launch itself, with weapons and baggage, down the path of violent opposition during much of the 1960s. But it is also very revealing that, in the end, that same party gave up on this path and once again came to act as a player capable of honestly following what was agreed upon. In addition, in this case, we are not only talking about PCV but also about the most violent creature of all the detachments AD suffered, such as the Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR) when taking the armed route, or even what would be the main dissent brewed in the very bowels of PCV: the Movement for Socialism (MAS).

So as not to catch anyone off guard, it should be stated that it was not only in Venezuela that it was necessary to adopt a technically elaborate platform that would allow to leave behind a recent and traumatic political experience. What took place in Venezuela after 1958 was not an occurrence born of the most absolute local originality. In this sense, one could cite what that same need of an instrumental nature meant in the case of neighboring Colombia, where the experience of the so-called “National Front” –exactly in 1958– also marked the end of the previous bipartisan violence. But perhaps more sensitive experiences could be cited, dating

back more than a decade to the governance agreements reached by Venezuela or Colombia towards the end of 1950.

Such is the case of Germany, where, as of 1945, moderation became a new virtue and where it was understood, on the basis of practical and instrumental debates, that only in this way was it possible not to relapse again into the predation and ideological extremism that characterized the dynamics raised between the parties during the 1920s and 1930s, and which so weakened the parliamentary regime to the point of paving the way for Nazism. In addition, the dynamics of the Cold War itself, as well as the geographical proximity to the Soviet Union, would take care of the rest when explaining the moderation that was imposed in the case of Germany.

I noted this last point in an essay I wrote for the National Academy of History on January 23, 1958. I conclude by paraphrasing myself: the promoters of the democratic recovery test must do much more than celebrate the fact, already relevant, that they returned to politics by way of voting, as it also means an act of negotiating political will. What must be underscored, if we look at what has been achieved since 1958, is that we are talking about agreements reached between heterogeneous political forces, which, as if that weren't enough, and as I already mentioned, had a long loaded history of animosities, mistrust, misgivings, and pugnacity behind them. Perhaps in orphan times like the ones we live in today, there is something that can be useful from this last lesson in particular.