

Democratization



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The weakening of the democratic system in Venezuela began decades before the electoral victory of the Chavista Revolution on December 6, 1998. Numerous investigations have been published in this regard¹. Unintentionally, and because it is part of our reality, we have been pioneers in the study of populism, a phenomenon which awakens the political and intellectual curiosity of many.

The autocratic advance of Chavismo has been gradual². It has expanded little by little. Venezuelans have witnessed the installation of a dictatorship that reduced democracy and instrumentalized its mechanisms to achieve its goals of domination. After twenty years in power, it has put an end to the legacy of democracy in our country, inaugurated in 1958. No

1 As a suggestion, the extensive literature that was published in Venezuela in the 1980s and 1990s can be reviewed, especially the studies by Miriam Kornblith, Aníbal Romero, Alan Brewer Carías, Juan Carlos Rey, and Jennifer McCoy. The political speeches of President Rómulo Betancourt (February, 1981), President Rafael Caldera (March 1, 1989, and February 4, 1992) and Luis Castro Leiva (January 23, 1999) might also be of interest.

2 See Juan Miguel Matheus, "The gradual nature of the dismantling of the rule of law in Venezuela." in *Democratization* (Caracas: Instituto Forma. 2019. Year 1- Number 2) 6-47.

domain has been exempt from its attacks. Perhaps there is where its totalitarian essence lies³...

In *Challenges faced by political parties in Venezuela*, the effect that the autocratic advance of the Chavista revolution has had on the internal dynamics of political parties will be studied, especially those that fight for democracy in the country. The article is composed by three sections: 1. The centrality of political parties in Venezuelan political culture, 2. Three effects of the procedural reduction of democracy, 3. Challenges faced by political parties. The perspective offered in this paper is not merely scientific. Far from proposing definitive ideas, it reflects upon the political experience of the author.

The centrality of political parties in Venezuelan political culture

Political parties are any political group that participates in elections and that can propose its candidates to public office through elections⁴. They can be of different ideological signs and have particular systems. Party systems are the result of numerous

3 The totalitarian nature of the Chavista revolution has been a matter of debate since its beginnings. Perhaps the lack of consensus around its autocratic essence has been one of the main issues of dissent among those who make up the democratic opposition. As I have expressed in previous articles, I consider that this discussion is not a minor matter. Identifying the nature of the regime is important because it can offer keys to political action. Far from being an intellectual curiosity, it is a real fact that can inform decision-making processes. To delve deeper into the totalitarian nature of the Chavista revolution, I recommend reading the studies by Francisco Plaza (*The Silence of Democracy*, 2011) and the communications by the Venezuelan Episcopal Conference from 2014.

4 Giovanni Sartori, *Partidos y sistemas de partidos* (Madrid: Alianza editorial, 2005), 101.

and complex factors, some specific to each country and other general ones⁵, such as the cultural and historical context in the case of the former, and the electoral regime in the case of the latter. Political parties were originated in the 19th century together with mass democracies and, as explained by Duverger⁶, they were developed under the influence of the culture and tradition of each place. This section describes the centrality of political parties as formative institutions which allowed and facilitated the democratic development of the country in the 20th century.

On July 5, 1811, Venezuela gained its independence from the Spanish Empire. Months later, it sanctioned its first Constitution. The new Republic fluctuated. The 19th century was difficult: the War of Independence, the Gran Colombia and its dissolution, the creation of the State of Venezuela in 1830, men on horseback, the Federal War, and confrontations between *caudillos*. The 20th century began under the dictatorship of Juan Vicente Gómez, who remained in power until death defeated him.

A new phase began in 1936. After the death of Gómez, a slow process of reforms towards democracy was set forth, supervised by men of the dictatorship. The proposal failed to convince or satisfy the different political forces in the country, and in 1945 the path was thwarted. A *coup d'état* led by *Acción Democrática* and members of the Armed Forces took over power, and the process of democratization was accelerated. According to Juan Carlos Rey, this moment sets forth the creation of mass political parties in Venezuela, which not only preceded the existence of modern social organizations, but in many cases even initiated them. In

5 Maurice Duverger, *Los partidos políticos*. (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2012) 231.

6 Maurice Duverger, *Los partidos políticos*. (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2012) 231.

particular, in our country, at the time when the first modern mass parties were constituted, there were no previously organized masses of peasants and urban workers, or they were extremely few and weak, so that a large part of our unions were created by these parties and followed their guidelines⁷.

This data helps to locate the centrality of the political parties in Venezuela. For better or for worse, they have set the rhythm, the means, and the capacity of organizations in our society. They have been the practical channel traditionally turned to in order to concretize collective and public initiatives.

The centrality of political parties in matters of social organization gained formal importance in 1958. The democracy inaugurated after the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez was marked by authentic ideological pluralism, and the political parties controlled all aspects of the national life⁸. The constitution 1961 included the political and organizational reality of society. For this reason, political parties were placed at the core of the emerging democracy.

There are no statistical records on the valuation of political parties during the first 15 years of democracy. However, the high participation in the electoral processes of 1958, 1963 and 1973 show that confidence was placed in them. John Martz and Enrique Baloyra conducted the first opinion studies in 1973 and

7 Juan Carlos Rey, *Temas de formación sociopolítica: el sistema de partidos venezolano, 1830-1999* (Caracas: Publicaciones UCAB, 2009), 29.

8 Alan Brewer Carías, *Sumario de la Constitución de 1961* (San Cristóbal: Editorial Jurídica Venezolana, 1983), 5.

in 1983⁹. Their results evidence a progressive disillusionment that began with the rejection of politicians and then spread to the parties. When supplementing these data with the results of Latinobarómetro –which started in 1995–, it can be seen that the initial discontent turned into contempt and affected the democratic system¹⁰ in the 1990s.

In Venezuela, the crisis of the parties preceded –and contributed to– the decline of democracy. In the 1990s, the bipartisan dynamics weakened and abstention increased markedly¹¹. Knight summarizes it as follows:

It is a fact that the discrediting of political parties had never been so low since 1958. It is convenient to differentiate the following: the discrediting of the two-party system, as it had predominated since the Puntofijo Pact; and the loss of prestige of the party institution in general, since the confusion between democracy and party system and, even more so, between party system and politics leads to the rejection of democracy and politics¹² (own translation).

9 Juan Carlos Rey collects and analyzes the results of these surveys in: Juan Carlos Rey, *Temas de formación sociopolítica: el sistema de partidos venezolano, 1830-1999* (Caracas: Publicaciones UCAB, 2009), 29.

10 Paola Bautista de Alemán, “Auge y crisis de las democracias pactadas: Venezuela, España y Chile” (Tesis doctoral, Universidad de Rostock, 2019).

11 Miriam Kornblith, *Crisis y transformación del sistema político venezolano: nuevas y viejas reglas del juego*. presented at the XX International Congress of the Association of Latin American Studies. Guadalajara - Mexico, (Editorial Lasa, 1997). Found on January 17, 2018 in <http://biblioteca.clacso.edu.ar/clacso/otros/20130702011124/kornblith.pdf>

12 Manuel Caballero, *La gestación de Hugo Chávez: 40 años de luces y sombras de la democracia venezolana* (Madrid: Editorial Catarata, 2000) 129.

The rejection towards political parties was so severe that electoral organizations that emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s called themselves “movements» rather than “political parties”¹³. However, the change in terminology did not imply a substantial change in its dynamics since its forms still resembled traditional parties¹⁴. They were new organizations that, although formally started from scratch, inherited traits and sympathizers of the previous order.

The Constitution of 1999 also included a critical disposition towards political parties. Article 67, which refers to the right of citizens to associate for political purposes, does not speak of “parties” but rather “associations for political purposes”. This distinction, added to the emphasis on direct democracy (Article 5 of the Constitution), is no less important. The constitutional text echoed prior criticism and proposed a *sui generis* constitutionalization of political parties, granting political parties a mediating function in the process of building popular will¹⁵.

13 In July 1997 Hugo Chávez created the “Movimiento V República”. Three years later, a group of young people founded the “Movimiento Primero Justicia”, the political organization that leads the Venezuelan opposition today.

14 Jesús Ascargota, “Monopolistische Parteien in Lateinamerika. Inkubation, Entwicklung und Persistenz eines Modells. Vergleichende Analyse von Mexiko, Kuba, Nikaragua und Venezuela” (Tesis doctoral, Universidad de Rostock, 2013).

15 Juan Miguel Matheus, *El concepto de disciplina de grupo* (Caracas: Centro de Estudios de Derecho Público de la Universidad Monteávila, Editorial Jurídica Venezolana e Instituto de Estudios Parlamentarios Fermín Toro, 2014), 77.

Three effects of the procedural reduction of democracy

The system that inaugurated the Chavista revolution –in tune with the anti-party atmosphere that prevailed in the country¹⁶– sought to remove the parties from its center and promote other ways for political organization. To achieve this purpose, it seems that the formal change in the constitutional text was insufficient. Eradicating the partisan dynamics that guided our political actions for more than four decades required changes in political culture, and such transformations are not guaranteed by decrees. Two decades have since passed, and the changes that have occurred in this area require rigorous studies. The intention is not to approach the phenomenon in its entirety, but to rather describe the political-electoral dynamics of Chavismo and specify three effects that it caused within the internal dynamics of the parties, especially those that make up the democratic opposition. The effects mentioned below are not unique or exclusive.

Hugo Chávez won his first presidential election in 1998. Between 1998 and 2015, 15 different types of elections were held: presidential, parliamentary and a referendum. The frequent call to elections offered the appearance of democratic legitimacy. The revolution wielded power away from the Constitution¹⁷ while repeatedly calling for elections. Chavismo reduced democracy to its procedural scope and mutilated its institutional dimension¹⁸.

16 I recommend reading Luis Castro Leiva's speech given at the Congress of the Republic on January 23, 1999. In his speech, he managed to synthesize the political environment that I refer to in this article: <https://prodavinci.com/el-discurso-de-luis-castro-leiva-sobre-el-23-de-enero-de-1958/>

17 Juan Miguel Matheus, "The gradual nature of the dismantling of the rule of law in Venezuela" in *Democratización* 1- no 2 (2019): 6-47.

18 Francisco Plaza, *El silencio de la democracia* (Caracas: El Nacional, 2011).

The autocratic tendencies of the promoters of the Constitution of 1999 only crippled the text.

The electoral dynamics imposed by the Chavista revolution had immediate effects, contrary to those proposed in terms of political organization. It seems that this mechanism, far from distancing the parties from the center of politics, rooted them there. Certainly, in Venezuela we experience the same phenomenon registered worldwide¹⁹, and party affiliation and/or identification rates are low²⁰. However, the recurring call to elections was able to reinforce the structures of parties and submitted those with the mechanisms to compete on the electoral field to other participation spaces.

The pressure of the described electoral dynamic encouraged the expansion of the national, regional, municipal and parish structures of the main opposition political parties. Members of the so-called G4²¹ created and strengthened an institutional architecture geared towards high electoral performance: development of the electoral roll, execution of campaigns, mobilization on election day, witnesses at all polls, and comprehensive defense of the vote. I must point out that this effort led by the parties, which was accompanied by society, responded to a unitary political strategy aimed at achieving political change

19 Larry Diamond and Richard Gunther, *Political parties and Democracy* (United States of America, The Johns Hopkins University Press and the National Endowment for Democracy, 2001)

20 Héctor Briceño, "Sistema de partidos venezolano: polarización y crisis de representación", in *Desarmado el modelo. Las transformaciones del sistema político venezolano desde 1999*, coord. Diego Urbaneja (Caracas: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2017).

21 The G4 is the unitary instance that includes the four main opposition parties in the country: Acción Democrática, Voluntad Popular, Un Nuevo Tiempo and Primero Justicia.

through the electoral route. The defeat of Chavismo at the ballot box was thought to mean an unequivocal path of democratization for the country²².

In 2015, the results of the organizational efforts described were seen: the opposition electorally defeated the revolution in the parliamentary elections of December 6. The unitary platform obtained 112 deputies and Chavismo, 55²³. This electoral setback provoked two reactions within the dictatorship: 1. A process of systematic harassment against the Parliament that blocked the National Assembly's possibilities for political changes²⁴; and 2. The strengthening of electoral limitations, configuring a non-competitive electoral scenario. Everything seems to indicate that the unitary electoral victory of December 6 only accelerated the autocratic tendencies of the Chavista Revolution.

What has been previously described may indicate that the procedural reduction of democracy that Chavismo implemented

22 On December 6, 2015, after the electoral results were released, the Secretary-General of the Mesa de la Unidad Democrática Jesús Torrealba declared: "Change has begun, Venezuela! Today we have reasons to celebrate. The country asked for change and that change begins today". See: https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2015/12/151204_venezuela_parlamentarias_oposicion_chavismo_dp

23 Certainly, the electoral victory of 2015 was not only due to the organizational capacity of the political parties. The results obtained responded to the confluence of multiple factors. Especially the spontaneous mobilization of citizens who voted for the option of change and defended their will when the process was closed. Even recognizing that there are more variables than those specified in this article, we must highlight the indispensable nature of the work of political parties and their structures as a means of channeling citizen preferences.

24 Carlos García Soto, "The blocking of the legislative function and of the comptroller function of the National Assembly by the Supreme Tribunal of Justice: an introduction", in *Democratization* 2, no 5 (2020): 31-59.

had three effects –not unique or exclusive– on the opposition political parties and their internal dynamics:

1. It rooted the parties at the center of the political game.
2. It stimulated the expansion of its electoral structures and guided the development of partisan-political life in this regard.
3. It encouraged other instances of social and political organization to join –formally or informally– in order to channel citizen participation through electoral political change mechanisms.

Challenges faced by political parties

On March 7, 2018, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, presented his annual report. In the statement, he stated:

I am also deeply alarmed (...) by the erosion of democratic institutions. The fundamental principle of the separation of powers has been severely compromised, since the National Constituent Assembly continues to concentrate unrestricted powers. Two main opposition parties have been disqualified by the Electoral Council, and the official opposition coalition has been invalidated by the Supreme Court²⁵.

Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein added that Venezuela does not meet the “minimum conditions for free and credible elections”, and offered an accurate diagnosis of the electoral conditions in the country.

²⁵ See: <https://news.un.org/es/story/2018/03/1428522>

In recent months, the situation has worsened. Despite internal and external pressure, the dictatorship has shown no signs of easing or opening up. On the contrary, they have intensified their repressive actions and oppressive maneuvers. Currently, the four main opposition parties are outlawed and the revolution is making efforts to build an opposition tailored to their interests²⁶.

The blocking of the electoral option accounts for the installation of a closed autocratic political system and imposes challenges on the entire society, especially on the political parties that have so far led the democratic struggle. In this section, I will list what I consider to be the main challenges that these organizations must face in the scenario described.

Before proceeding, it is worth remembering three premises that I have set out throughout the article. Firstly, political parties are the institutions of political and social mediation with the longest tradition and organizational capacity in the country. Secondly, the procedural reduction of Chávez's democracy was accompanied by an electoral dynamic that relocated the parties to the center of the political contest. And third, the recurring call to election promoted the development and strengthening of the electoral structures of these organizations.

The main challenges faced by the parties in the described scenario are economic, political, and existential.

26 Paola Bautista de Alemán, "Venezuela: electoral political perspectives for a failed and partially collapsed Gangster State", in *Democratization* 1, no 3 (2019): 61-86.

Economic challenge

Venezuela is a country in ruins, which suffers hyperinflation, poverty, hunger, inequality, the collapse of public services, forced migration, among others. I will hereby present some data that illustrates the panorama. The National Assembly Finance Commission periodically calculates inflation rates. It is the only official figure freely available. In April 2020, Parliament reported that the country experiences 102.4% accumulated inflation and 3,276% year-on-year inflation²⁷. In addition to this, the minimum wage is \$4 a month and the food basket for a family of 5 people costs \$255.

The National Survey of Living Conditions (Encovi) published in 2019²⁸ revealed high rates of misery. The study carried out by the Central University of Venezuela, the Simón Bolívar University and the Andrés Bello Catholic University indicated that 87% of Venezuelans live in poverty, 80% suffer from food insecurity and 89% of families cannot buy food. That same year, Caritas de Venezuela warned that severe acute malnutrition had doubled in 14 states of the country²⁹.

Along with poverty, another concern is the structural collapse of public services. The Venezuelan Public Services Observatory conducts research to estimate its performance. In its latest studies, it has found that 16.7% of homes receive running water, 40% of homes suffer from continuous interruptions in electricity service

27 See: <https://angelalvaradorangel.com/2020/01/23/dip-alvarado-inflacion-de-diciembre-2019-se-ubico-en-331-y-la-acumulada-e-interanual-se-encuentra-en-7-374/>

28 See: <https://encovi.ucab.edu.ve/>

29 See: <http://www.accionsolidaria.info/website/caritas-venezuela-desnutricion-aguda-severa-aumento-100-en-14-estados/>

and 63% of citizens do not have internet service at home³⁰. In addition to this, the acute fuel crisis in the country in recent weeks has crystallized and mobility problems are severe. Such destruction explains the migratory wave that has affected the region. According to UNHCR (UN Refugee Agency), refugees and migrants from Venezuela exceed 4 million³¹.

The described economic environment is devastating and impacts every Venezuelan. Most of them do not have a stable job, or social security, or the money to buy food; seldom receive clean water, and there are constant power cuts. Living in Venezuela has become a survival challenge. This reality brutally impacts our daily lives and could encourage entropy. It can limit our social dimension. Surviving is a demanding task that leaves little room for other activities.

In this sense and in the first place, the economic challenge that the parties that oppose the dictatorship must face is profoundly human: *Finding incentives so that Venezuelans are not reduced to our material shortcomings and so they find meaning in political participation.*

Two specific risks may emerge in the described environment. Firstly, misery can be a breeding ground for the economic manipulation of leadership and militancy. "Economic manipulation" is understood as the purchase of consciences with financing from the regime or people close to it. In the last months, Primero Justicia experienced this threat with the so-called "Operation Alacrán". The dictatorship bought the deputies Luis

30 See: <http://www.observatoriovsp.org/>

31 See: <https://www.acnur.org/noticias/press/2019/6/5cfa5eb64/refugiados-y-migrantes-de-venezuela-superan-los-cuatro-millones-acnur-y.html>

Parra (Yaracuy state) and Conrado Pérez (Trujillo state) and tried to “sting” regional and parish leaders³².

The second risk concerns solidarity structures within political parties. The serious deficiencies of the militancy encourage –almost naturally– the construction of structures of internal solidarity that seek to alleviate and accompany the pain of poverty. These mechanisms are necessary and respond to human principles. However, if they are not implemented rigorously, responsibly, and uprightly, there is a risk of starting a vicious circle that will give rise to patronage and ultimately weaken the organization. The ultimate challenge is to take care of the fine line that separates solidarity from partisan patronage.

Political challenge

Nicolás Maduro’s dictatorship is fierce, and those who militate in political parties are perhaps the central focus of its angry attacks. According to the Organization of American States in Venezuela, there are currently 278 political prisoners³³, among which are the deputies Juan Requesens, Renzo Pietro and Gilber Caro. There are also more than twenty representatives in exile, including Julio Borges, who presided over Parliament in 2017. Deputy Juan Pablo Guanipa, who is Vice President of the Chamber, was stripped of his parliamentary immunity by the Supreme Tribunal of Justice.

32 “Operación Alacrán en 16 frases: montos, nombres y Maduro”. See: <https://talcualdigital.com/la-operacion-alacran-en-16-frases-montos-nombres-y-maduro/>

33 “OEA valida listado de presos políticos en Venezuela: 278”. See: <https://www.radiotelevisionmarti.com/a/presos-pol%C3%ADticos-venezuela-ong-foro-penal-oea/224270.html>

He remains in the country and suffers constant harassment from State security forces.

Persecution is not limited to those who hold positions of popular election or national leadership within political parties. Middle cadres are also intimidated. In recent weeks, the dictatorship has arrested three collaborators of the President Juan Guaidó. Fernando Albán, former councilor of Caracas and National Secretary of Trade Union Justice (Primero Justicia), was murdered on October 8, 2018, in the SEBIN after having suffered serious torture³⁴.

To be dedicated to politics in Venezuela is to submit oneself to serious risks. And such dangers are not limited to those who serve the democratic struggle inside or outside the country (those who work from exile also suffer threats). The harassment extends to their closest families and collaborators. For this reason, the political challenge that the parties that oppose the dictatorship face refers to *its strengthening as societies of free people that may be the refuge where its members find the necessary strength to overcome the fear inspired by the regime and to be constant in the fight for liberation.*

Delving into the terms, “society” is understood as was defined by Jacques Maritain³⁵. It is a truly human, ethical-social reality that is the work of reason and is linked to man’s intellectual and spiritual abilities. The creation of societies responds to the social

34 “El opositor venezolano Fernando Albán fue asesinado, según el informe policial”. See: https://www.abc.es/internacional/abci-opositor-venezolano-fernando-alban-asesinado-segun-informe-policial-201811202109_noticia.html

35 Jacques Maritain, *Lecturas escogidas de Jacques Maritain III: Visión general de su filosofía política y social*, ed. Angel C. Correa (Ediciones Humanismo Integral) Retrieved from: http://www.jacquesmaritain.com/pdf/01_LE/03_LE_FilPol.pdf

nature of the human person. And it is a voluntary and free act of those who decide to devote to others in a common space.

It is important to specify two ideas: freedom and will. As was stated previously, the dictatorship outlawed the main opposition political parties. It took away their formal identification –electoral card and legal form– using judicial treachery. These organizations do not exist in the formal construction of the public space that the dictatorship tries to impose. However, reality offers a different perspective. The parties, being true human societies that respond to the exercise of freedom and the will of their members, exist and have the capacity to grow despite the attacks of those who seek to remain in power at all costs.

Regarding the word *strengthen*, in a democracy, the strengthening of organizations for electoral purposes is closely related to the territorial and numerical expansion of militancy. It is associated with its capacity for exposure, proselytizing, and accessing power through the conquest of wills in free and transparent elections. The autocratic context tends to broaden this perspective. It does not mean that the areas described above should be abandoned or neglected, which in fact offer an established work dynamic capable of efficiently meeting a possible call for fairly competitive elections, but that the concept must be rearranged.

The ferocity of the dictatorship forces to reconsider what the strengthening of political organizations consists of. Recalling the years of persecution of the dictatorship, Don Patricio Aylwin wrote:

“Saving the body and the soul of the party” has become our task. As expressed in the text, “saving the soul” required us to “maintain our moral dignity, be consistent with our principles, affirm our truth, defend human rights, be in solidarity with the suffering”. And “saving the body” required “being prudent and cunning, not exposing ourselves to the wrath of the powerful, acting with care and managing to maintain an organization appropriate to the circumstances”³⁶ (own translation).

Don Patricio’s testimony offers a strengthening itinerary for political parties that resist dictatorships. The situation is as difficult as the challenge it poses: What does it mean to “save the party’s body and soul”? In order to try to answer this question, these intellectual references will be complemented with my political experience. I am a member of the National Board of Directors of Primero Justicia and I chair the Juan Germán Roscio Foundation, the party’s training body. For years I have toured the country and shared with our militancy. In Primero Justicia, we have set out to find a practical channel for Don Patricio’s route and, in the next paragraphs, I will recount our efforts.

Firstly, we identify a fundamental premise as a starting point: the salvation of the party’s body and soul is a joint task. The soul without the body is horrifying and the body without the soul is dead. For this reason, our initial task was to coordinate efforts between the national training body and the National Organizing Secretariat. Today, both teams work side by side promoting the expansion of our structures and strengthening what unites us. In reality, this takes the form of political activities for educational

36 Patricio Aylwin Azocar, *El reencuentro de los demócratas: del golpe al triunfo del No* (Santiago de Chile: Ediciones B Chile S.A, 1998), 11.

and organizational purposes that encourage those present to continue despite the obstacles that reality imposes on us.

The content we offer and the organization mechanisms we use are tied to our reality. Each Venezuelan carries with them a personal tragedy associated with a complex humanitarian crisis. Our militancy –and the entire country– suffer from hunger, exhaustion, physical fatigue, insomnia, depression, among others. We have found that pain and uncertainty can lead us to question the meaning of our efforts. Without a doubt, confronting extreme situations raises fundamental questions: Why do we live in this situation? What is the country asking from me at the moment? The demands for training and political organization in Venezuela are conditioned by the environment we live in. The militancy needs supplies to understand and face the injustices it suffers, tools to manage its emotions, and mechanisms to raise its voice without exposing itself to unnecessary risks.

“Saving body and soul” has brought us closer to the transcendent meaning of politics. We have given ourselves the task of creating pedagogies that allow us to make accessible philosophical and metaphysical concepts. We emphasize how politics is the highest form of charity, as well as the importance of cultivating human virtues. We have transformed training and organization sessions into human encounters where we strive to cultivate the ideas that unite us. Our goal is that each militant is recognized as unique and irreplaceable. Our sessions are an opportunity to thank them for their dedication and to remind them that they are part of a project that calls them personally.

The party as a society of free people that serves as a refuge for its members also feeds on the testimony of its members. Every time

a leader embodies our ideas, it encourages our moral. Generally, “testimonies” are accompanied by pain: physical disappearance, torture, persecution, kidnapping, exile. Our moral grows with testimonies and accompaniment. No party member should feel alone in the fight and will always be able to go to their bosom to find hope and strength. In this way, the party becomes a refuge for its members.

Existential challenge

The installation of the dictatorship imposes challenges of different orders. While the previous sections were dedicated to economic and political, this will delve into existential challenges. I have named it that way because it refers to the radical nature of the personal and institutional struggle that the current situation in Venezuela demands.

The challenge of an existential order has two dimensions: one personal and the other institutional. In the case of the former, the political vocation is very personal. The decision to devote oneself to the public must be free and individual. In a democracy, this call is developed in political parties. This imposes challenges associated with partisan life: building leadership, growing in the internal structure, contributing to the organization’s political project. All this in order to be a candidate for a position of popular election, win elections, and reach positions of power. In this way, the fullness of the political vocation may be associated with a specific office and/or with a specific electoral victory. It can be risky because from this perspective the end of democracy can mean the end of politics.

History shows us that this is not the case. Politicians who have faced and defeated ferocious dictatorships have managed to develop their political vocation in hostile environments. Felipe González , leader of the Spanish Socialist Workers Party and precursor of democracy in Spain, was born in 1942. He came to the world when Franco was installed in power. He found channels to develop his political vocation in a proscribed and persecuted political organization. He stood firm and when the doors of transition opened, he found himself at the forefront of democratic forces. He promptly became President of the Government and served there for 14 years. We have closer examples: Rómulo Gallegos, the first democratically elected President in Venezuela. He was born in 1884, in a fragmented and caudillist country. In his own words: barbaric and wild. Adversity was never an obstacle to the development of his political vocation or his literary talents.

Difficulties force us to reflect on the meaning of the political vocation in today's Venezuela. The death of democracy does not mean the death of politics and requires opening horizons. In a dictatorship, the fullness of the political vocation is deeply human and associated with a personal and collective contribution to the cause of freedom. Once the electoral option has disappeared, "we have a free conscience and can work for the country seeking democracy as a single reward", as Deputy Juan Pablo Guanipa stated in a press conference on January 15, 2020.

In the *institutional level*, what does the country currently demand of political parties? Dictatorships ban political parties. They seek to eliminate their adversaries and dominate our modes of articulation. However, as we specified in previous sections, there is a reality superior to its ambitions: *the social dimension and the vocation to the common good*.

In history, we find that the illegalization of parties is followed –almost naturally– by the rise of political movements. The movements are free spaces for political and social organization that seek democratic liberation. Its main asset is *its moral authority, its moral reserve*. “Solidarity” (Poland) was led by Lech Walesa and “Charter 77” (Czechoslovakia) by Vaclav Havel. The first was a union leader; the second was a writer. Both testified of spiritual strength and knew how to guide their people to freedom.

Final considerations

From its beginnings, Chavismo set out to promote new modes of organization that would displace the parties from the center of the political conflict in the country. He used an anti-party discourse and when he came to power he promoted constitutional changes oriented in that direction. However, the procedural reduction of democracy had opposite effects: (i) Reaffirmed the parties at the center of the political contest, (ii) Stimulated the expansion of their electoral structures and (iii) Encouraged the other instances of political organization to approach them in order to channel the wishes of citizen participation.

Currently, the electoral path is blocked. This reality requires political parties to rethink themselves and find ways of liberation that allow Venezuelans to earn back their vote. Certainly, the robbing of the right to choose deprives the parties of formal and practical areas that constituted them. Strictly speaking, they ceased to be so because they cannot run for elections (remember the initial concept of Giovanni Sartori referred to in the article). However, history shows that autocratic obstacles can offer the opposition leadership an opportunity to resist and cultivate an almost invincible power: the moral reserve. This *moral power* is

a quarry for political action that can open doors to liberation and offer pre-democratic conditions in an eventual democratic inauguration.