

Democratization



Year 3, Issue 10

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and the birth of its representative
regime (1810-1830)

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how to rebuild political
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Introduction: on political representation

One of the most difficult moments of any democratizing feat is when dictatorships advance, the formal mechanisms of political representation are exhausted, and the opposition forces find themselves in the difficult situation of creating mechanisms for consensus that allow them to remain united in their objectives towards freedom. Politicians who have preceded us in this liberating task have described it as a desert full of uncertainty and hopelessness, an arid horizon where the regime revels in its apparent provisional victory. I am referring to situations such as those faced by our country after the electoral fraud of December 1957 or Chile after the failed negotiation of 1984. These are milestones that demand the reconfiguration and reorganization of the opposition forces with the sole purpose of resisting autocratic systems that seem to perfect themselves over time and stubbornly cling to power. It is not an easy task.

Venezuelan is going through these times. The tenth issue of *Democratización* is dedicated to reflecting on this issue. The underlying theme behind this practical challenge of politics – creating mechanisms for consensus as part of the democratic struggle– is representation. In a democracy, problems of this nature are resolved in elections. Citizens go to the polls and choose their representatives. Then, in formal instances, laws and regulations dictate the rules of the political game. But in a dictatorship everything is complex. Without elections, there are no formal mechanisms to choose representatives and thus the

urgent need arises to create mechanisms of real representation that allow the articulation of the entire society.

Political representation is an extraordinary phenomenon. Perhaps we have witnessed the power a person emanates when taking a microphone, looking up and addressing the public they manage to touch the fibers of the community. This authority shakes consciences and articulates actions that can change the course of events. It is wonderful. It is not “messianism”. It is the power of the word turned into action. Eric Voegelin delved into this phenomenon in *The New Science of Politics*. He established a relationship between representation and articulation. The person or group that represents a society is capable of articulating actions that move the political agenda. Thus, when there is a void of representation, there is also inaction, and an inability to advance towards freedom.

This is the present of our nation. Venezuelans can perceive this inaction... sometimes we feel as if we were in the desert. And the first practical impulse to beat the desolation is the reconstruction of the political unity of those who oppose the dictatorship. However, there may be a preceding issue, to which we dedicate the following chapters: **political representation**. We ask ourselves: Can there be political unity of the opposition without the real political representation of those who make it up? How to qualify or weigh the capacity of representation of each political force in the middle of the autocratic desert? How to create real mechanisms of consensus between political forces?

The tenth issue of *Democratización* magazine includes four articles: “We, the Representatives” by Tomás Straka; “Society, parties and elections: how to rebuild political representation?” by

Héctor Briceño; “Notes on political parties under an authoritarian system: the case of Venezuela” by Guillermo Tell Aveledo Coll, and an interview conducted by Pedro Pablo Peñaloza with Edinson Ferrer Arteaga, National Secretary of the First Justice Organization. Here is a brief review of each.

“We, the Representatives” takes us back to our beginnings as a republic. The author specifies two central ideas that can nurture the analysis of the current moment: First, Venezuela was born from a crisis of representation that was formally resolved -but not definitively- when the deputies of 1811 established that, ultimately, sovereignty rests on the people and their exercise to vote. And secondly, the episodes of anarchy that the war of independence generated were occasionally resolved through formal mechanisms of political organization -Congresses- that offered legitimacy to the conquests achieved with arms. Simón Bolívar highlighted this in the letter he wrote to Juan Germán Roscio on the eve of the Angostura Congress: “In vain would weapons destroy tyrants if we did not establish a political order capable of repairing the ravages of the revolution. The Military System is that of force, and force is not government”¹.

“Society, parties and elections: how to rebuild political representation?” is a journey through the recent electoral history of our country. Briceño accurately describes the events and restrictions that the Chavista revolution has imposed on our right to choose. Finally, the author analyzes the political and social challenges assigned to us by this autocratic reality. “Notes on political parties under an authoritarian system: the Venezuelan case” by Guillermo Tell Aveledo Coll analyzes the current situation

1 Own translation.

of political parties in our country and describes their weaknesses and strengths in a non-democratic environment.

The interview with Edinson Ferrer Arteaga, National Secretary of the First Justice Organization, responds to the nature of our efforts. For FORMA, it is a priority to highlight the practical channel of ideas that lead us to reflection. In this sense, Ferrer's testimony –as transcribed by Pedro Pablo Peñaloza– shows the work that Primero Justicia is currently doing. I believe that the organizational efforts reported by Ferrer are the ferment of the real representation that our country demands at this time. We would do wrong if we tried to rebuild a political unit that lacks representative support in the hearts of Venezuelans. As Straka points out in “We, the Representatives”, representation only reaches its formal and real stage when it is leveraged on ordered political bodies capable of articulating initiatives that succeed in defeating anarchy and tyranny.

Caracas, February 21, 2021

Paola Bautista de Alemán

We, the representatives: Venezuela and the birth of its representative regime (1810-1830)

Tomás Straka

A problem of two centuries, by way of introduction

Venezuela, as a State, was born out of a representativeness crisis. Although there were many variables that set forth its independence process and the establishment of its nation-State, the immediate trigger was the need to respond to the institutional collapse that Spain suffered in 1808. The abdication of two kings, who mutually surrendered and took the crown from each other and the unconsulted surrender of sovereignty to a third party could not but demolish the legitimacy of all those involved. That which at first glance seemed like a tragedy or a farce (surely both) forced the people to seek another form of legitimacy. In the beginning, it was sought within the same legal and institutional parameters in which they had been operating for centuries, but very soon the pursuit broke, to a greater or lesser extent, all –or at least much– of the preceding forms. The cumbersomeness of the abdications showed that the problem was not that a certain king was, or was not, legitimate. Rather, it proved that the entire institution of the Crown was rotten and it was necessary to reform or suppress it. The Constitution of Bayonne and the Cortes

of Cádiz were the two most important responses that were given in Spain. The same was done in America, establishing congresses and drafting constitutions throughout the region, either to reform the monarchy or to suppress it.

In this context, the Congress in Caracas in 1811 was the first to take things as far as possible: declare broken ties with the Spanish Crown, create a State of its own, and adopt a republican form. In his famous and very influential study on the crisis of the Hispanic world at the beginning of the 19th century, François-Xavier Guerra affirmed that the process consisted largely of the assumption of political modernity on both sides of the ocean, with everything that it brought on¹. The Venezuelan case confirms it. Abandoning the idea of traditional representativeness and assuming the modern one is one of the most important and influential legacies of everything that was done in those days.

The Congress meeting in Caracas, which was carried out in order to seek a way out of the crisis, considered that neither the series of abdications staged by Carlos IV and Fernando VII, nor the surrender of the crown to José I, were in accordance with the law. Especially the surrender of the crown to José Bonaparte, which was made without consulting subjects. Consequently, the deputies concluded that the pact with the Spanish Crown had been broken. The problem was not that they had decided to separate, but rather that the kings had fled the court and left an impostor in their place. Consequently:

We, the Representatives of the United Provinces of Caracas, Cumaná, Barinas, Margarita, Barcelona, Mérida and Trujillo, who form the American Confederation of Venezuela in the

1 François-Xavier Guerra, *Modernidad e independencias* (Madrid, Mapfre, 1992).

Southern Continent, meeting in Congress, and achieving full and absolute possession of our rights that we have just and legitimately recovered on April 19, 1810, as a result of the Bayonne Day and the occupation of the Spanish Throne by the conquest and succession of another new dynasty constituted without our consent².

Accordingly, José Bonaparte and his group were "the intrusive governments that abrogated national representation". And since there was no legitimate government in the metropolis, they remained "independent of all forms of government of the peninsula of Spain"³. The next 22 years of war show how

2 Own translation. "Independence Act of Venezuela" (http://www.ucv.ve/fileadmin/user_upload/BicentenarioUCV/Documentos/Acta_de_la_independencia_de_Venezuela_de_1811-1_1_.pdf) (Retrieved February 2, 2021)

3 They were sworn in with the following formula: "Do you swear to God, in the name of the Holy Gospels that you will touch, and do you promise the Homeland to preserve and defend its rights and those of Mr. Don Fernando VII, without the least relationship, or influence with France; independent of all forms of government of the peninsula of Spain; and without any other representation than that which resides in the General Congress of Venezuela; oppose any other domination that seeks to exercise sovereignty in these countries, or prevent their absolute and legitimate independence, when the Confederation of their Province deems it convenient to keep our Sacred Religion pure, unharmed and inviolable, and defend the Mystery of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary Our Lady: to promote directly or indirectly the general interests of the Confederation of which you are a part, and the individuals of the district that has constituted you; respect and obey the laws and provisions that this Congress sanctions and promulgates; subject yourselves to the economic regime that it establishes for its interior government; and fulfill exactly the duties of the council that you are going to exercise? " (quoted by Manuel Pérez Vila, "Congress of 1811", <https://bibliofep.fundacionempresaspolarg.org/dhv/entradas/c/congreso-de-1811/>) (Retrieved February 1, 2021). The term "independent from all forms of government of the Spanish peninsula" referred to José I Bonaparte and the Regency, understanding that the only legitimate

difficult it was to convince a good part of Venezuelans about these conclusions, and perhaps the next 200 years are proof of how difficult it has been to put it into practice when it is finally imposed politically and militarily. But the point is that, with the progressions and setbacks, with the changes in political ideas and languages throughout two centuries, with how much is still to be done, one thing was clear from everything proclaimed by those deputies of 1811: Ultimately, sovereignty rests with the people and it is exercised through the vote.

The following pages present a fairly brief summary of the emergence of this idea of representation. Due to the extent of the subject, it is only possible to dive into this initial moment and point out the paths by which it can be projected into the future. In this sense, this text should be read as only the gateway for what could be a broader inquiry. That is why the references of other studies have been pointed out at the foot of each page, many of which are available on the Internet, where those interested can further research.

From traditional to modern representation

Let's go back to François-Xavier Guerra's thesis. What exactly are we talking about when we refer to *political modernity*? As it often is in these cases, we are dealing with a complex category, but Guerra stands at a cornerstone: it is a form of representation that is not *corporate*, but based on an idea of the people conceived as a set of *free individuals*. The deputies of 1811 did not represent corporations, but constituencies defined by the number of these individuals. However, they still have one foot in each of

sovereign was Fernando VII. As can be seen, in the course of three months, it was concluded that his abdication in Bayonne had been voluntary and that therefore he broke the pact of fidelity.

the conceptions, which illustrates well their displacement. When they claimed that the pact with the King had been broken due to non-compliance on his part, the traditional form of representation in the Hispanic world was being considered. In it, for the King to be king, he had to receive the oath of the people, who were ultimately the depositary of sovereignty. This oath marked a pact in which the people delegated their sovereignty to the King. This is usually called *pactism*.

The pact was solemnized in an act called the *Swearing*, in which the representatives of the people symbolically delegated sovereignty to the monarch. Those representatives were not officials elected by general vote, but the members of a corporation, the *Cabildo*, or Town Hall. It was the legitimate representation of the people, and the one which gave thus legitimacy to the King. This explains why the people of Caracas (and those of Santa Fe, and those of Santiago and Buenos Aires) could consider José I illegitimate: if they had not agreed with him, it was not legitimate for him to want to rule as King of Spain. Now, who made up the Cabildo? Each locality was a republic, in the classical sense, which could be a *republic of Spaniards* or a *republic of Indians*, and in it the Fathers of the Family gathered in an assembly elected a Cabildo. *The People* was not formed by all the inhabitants, but only by the Father of the Family, that is to say, by men with next of kin and properties. The rest was *the crowd or promiscual crowd*, in which basically the Greco-Roman model was also being followed⁴.

During the Swearing, the King was represented by the Royal Standard. It is not fortuitous that to this day Caracas continues to use it as the flag of the city (although the royal arms were

4 The Synodal Constitutions of 1687 clearly specifies this. For an explanation, see Elías Pino Iturrieta, *Against lust, chastity. Stories of sin in the Venezuelan 18th century* (Caracas, Editorial Alfadil, 1992), 28 and ss.

replaced with the coat of arms of Santiago de León de Caracas). This is due to various reasons, but largely to the place occupied by the Cabildo of Caracas when in 1810 it organized a *Junta*, or gathering, to address the emergency of the power vacuum in Spain. It is beyond the limits of this study to determine how much this worked as an excuse to then continue towards independence (although everything indicates that a large part of the promoters had that in mind), or how true the power vacuum was. The fact is that the Cabildo of Caracas led the formation of a *Junta* faced with the lack of control over the imprisonment of Fernando VII and the illegitimacy of José I, who was publicly and loudly rejected by the city in a tumult in July 1808. This *Junta* was called *Supreme Conservative Gathering of the Rights of Fernando VII* (or *Junta Suprema de Caracas*) and began to rule in his name. It even assumed Highness attribution, and it had to be referred to as her Highness. Once again, the typical Hispanic path of the other Juntas that were formed in Spain and America was followed, but it shows what was really intended: to do, in the absence of the King, what he used to do⁵.

Up to this moment, the problem of representativeness was being covered according to the legal and institutional channels of the Old Regime. There could be a discussion about whether or not there was a power vacuum in Spain (Maracaibo and Guayana believed that this was not the case and started a civil war “against Caracas”), but there was no further discussion as to what should be done in the case that there was indeed a power vacuum. But this changed quickly both in Venezuela and in Spain. This is where

5 On Venezuelan Juntismo: Gustavo Vaamonde, *Los novadores de Caracas: la Suprema Junta de Gobierno de Venezuela, 1810-1811* (Caracas, National Academy of History / Bancaribe Foundation, 2009); y Carole Leal Curiel, *La primera revolución de Caracas, 1808-1812: del juntismo a la independencia* (Caracas, Andrés Bello Catholic University, 2019).

the events took a turn. Many of those who acted like this just followed the rules and traditions, but already thought differently. Their idea of how the representation of the people should be chosen, even the people themselves, was already modern. And it is they, on both sides of the Ocean, who end up taking control of the *Juntista* movement.

Ultimately, when the Junta Suprema called elections for a Congress to meet, which in turn would decide what to do in the midst of the power vacuum, it marked a turning point, one that literally demolished traditional representativeness⁶. *The Regulations for the election and meeting of deputies who are to compose the conservative body of the Rights of Mr. Don Fernando VII in the provinces of Venezuela*⁷, drafted in 1810 by Juan Germán Roscio for the elections that took place in October of the same year, ended corporate representation and replaced it with the sum of individuals with the right to vote, regardless of the caste, state and corporation to which they belonged. Few things have been more revolutionary in Venezuelan history⁸.

Thus, if the deputies considered that the King had broken the pact according to the criteria of traditional representativeness, when they claimed to exercise the “representation” of the Venezuelan people, they already did so based on modern representativeness.

6 A fundamental study on the subject: Ángel Rafael Almarza, *Por un gobierno representativo. Génesis de la República de Colombia* (Caracas, National Academy of History / Bancaribe Foundation, 2011).

7 *El Reglamento para la elección y reunión de diputados que han de componer el cuerpo conservador de los Derechos del Señor Don Fernando VII en las provincias de Venezuela*

8 On this regulation, see: Carole Leal Curiel, “El Reglamento de Roscio y las elecciones de 1810: una convocatoria a la igualdad”, *Argos*, 30, 59: 136-157 (http://ve.scielo.org/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0254-16372013000200008&lng=es&nrm=iso), Retrieved January 30, 2021).

Between anarchy and tyranny, or the tribulations of representation

15 years and almost 5,000 kilometers from the Venezuelan Congress of 1811, those who met in Chuquisaca to discuss the destinations of Upper Peru had a lot of experience. The time and the territories that separated both congresses had caused very profound changes. Once again some deputies met to affirm that a certain population was a nation and thus create a new State, but the "miserable King Fernando VII" (as we read in the Bolivian independence act) was a minor issue, in comparison with the most urgent issue, which would determine integration with Peru or prolonged attachment to the Río de la Plata, or taking an independent path. The latter was chosen, giving the country the name of Simón Bolívar, *Bolivia*, and designating the Liberator as its President and Protector.

Although Bolívar declined the honors, leaving the opportunity for Antonio José de Sucre, he did take the chance to try out the constitutional ideas that he had been thinking about for at least five years. The Venezuelan anarchy, with its social and racial war, the difficulties to establish the Republic of Colombia (conventionally known as Gran Colombia), the also anarchic situation in Peru: everything had made Bolívar a man who desperately sought order, although without abandoning profound revolutionary transformations. A very complicated combination, which at the time got out of hand, and which in posterity has made Bolivarian thought so ductile to be assumed by all movements, from the extreme left to conservatism, each taking what suits them best.

It is no wonder that its famous draft constitution proved controversial to all. For some, the lifetime presidency, almost traced back to the British crown, was too aristocratic. To others,

the abolition of slavery and the extension of the right to vote to almost all men seemed extreme radicalism. But it is the result of the search for a middle point, which the Liberator himself explains in his also very famous speech to the Constituent Congress of Bolivia:

Legislators! Your duty calls you to resist the collision of two monstrous enemies that are fighting each other, and both will attack you at the same time: tyranny and anarchy form an immense ocean of oppression, surrounding a small island of freedom, perpetually overwhelmed by the violence of the waves and of the hurricanes, that drag it without ceasing to submerge it. Look at the sea that you are going to sail with a fragile boat, whose pilot is so inexperienced⁹.

Over the next two centuries, the legislators of the Hispanic world have had to confront the two monsters of anarchy and tyranny. It is the turbulent sea –as suggested by Bolívar's metaphors– through which modern representation has been navigating since it was first imposed in Caracas. It even seems that the legitimacy crisis of 1808 could not be resolved, at least fundamentally, until the first half of the 20th century (although with much later blows in many places). In Venezuela, it was a disaster in the first years (and in the following years it has been sometimes, or has come close to it in many cases). The Congress of 1811-12 and its weak Executive were followed by six dictatorships in three years. That must be some kind of world record. Let's see: the commissary dictatorship that Francisco de Miranda received from the same Congress in 1812, the one implemented by Domingo Monteverde between 1812 and 1813, those of Simón

9 Simón Bolívar, "*Discurso del Libertador al Congreso Constituyente de Bolivia*" (<http://revistas.pucp.edu.pe/index.php/pensamientoconstitucional/article/view/3386/3234> Retrieved February 2, 2021)

Bolívar in the West of the country (Estado de Venezuela) and Santiago Mariño in the West (Estado de Oriente), between 1813-1814; the very brief one imposed by José Tomás Boves in 1814, together with the equally brief one by Manuel Piar and José Félix Ribas in that same year.

Other cases could be mentioned, or it could be discussed whether Piar and Ribas really became a government, or if the Bolívar of 1813 can be defined as a dictator. But one cannot avoid the fact that, in any case, between blows (from Monteverde and Boves to their captains on the royalist side; from Piar and Ribas to Mariño and Bolívar; and to some extent from the young officers to Miranda) and generalized violence (wars, looting, massacres), the new representation ceased to exist in practice, almost as spectacularly as it had happened with the traditional one, and the successful military figure who overthrows everything took its place. The histories of all Hispano-America and of Spain until well into the 20th century show how deeply these roots took hold. That is why Bolívar knew quite well what he was saying when he talked about *tyranny* and *anarchy*, as Miranda knew when he uttered his apothegm of "*bochinche, bochinche*"¹⁰! These people can do nothing but *bochinche*!"

Nevertheless, and this is an important fact, the *bochinche*, tyranny and anarchy did not mean that the Republicans stopped feeling that something more than weapons was needed to be legitimate. Whoever believes that, because of the praetorianism and caudillismo that began then, the Hispanic Americans do not give any importance to representation, is misguided. The search for legitimacy has always accompanied caudillos and praetors, sometimes as a simple cover, or sometimes legitimately.

¹⁰ In Venezuela, *bochinche* is used to refer to tumult, commotion, uproar or riot.

The mere necessity of setting up a congress and calling for elections shows that they have some power, even symbolic. The Miranda dictatorship can be left out of this group because it was a commissioner, appointed by Congress, as stipulated by law. As Dictator, he preferred to leave things as they were and signed a capitulation with Domingo Monteverde, who was head of the King's armies that advanced against the Republic from Maracaibo and Coro. It was an honorable peace, which would respect life and property, but Monteverde did not comply, as in reality, he did not comply with everything else: he did not respect the authority of his superiors, he did not implement the Constitution of Cádiz, he declared himself Captain-General and he decided to govern by what he called the "Law of Conquest", that is, with extra-constitutional powers that were not based on anything other than his weapons. So the real start of the dictators' saga in Venezuela must be in Monteverde.

This situation was the argument with which Simón Bolívar invaded Venezuela from New Granada in 1813. His mission was to reunite Congress and thus restore legitimacy. Not being able to do so, because the deputies were imprisoned, in exile, or dead, he then began to rule *de facto*. It was a legal problem that he understood very quickly. He had neither been elected by anyone, nor was he even a Venezuelan citizen (he had been nationalized from New Granada), nor did he lead, in the strict sense, an army of the country, but of the United Provinces of New Granada. How can this be even given an appearance of legitimacy? The proposal that he declared himself the successor to the Miranda dictatorship, whose extinction was nullified when Monteverde failed to comply with the capitulation, did not prosper. In the end, with the country once again on fire with pro-monarchic rebellions, in January 1814, Bolívar convened an Assembly in

Caracas, whose representativeness has never been very clear, so that it would grant him special powers.

In this way, the royalists were able to call Bolívar a *tyrant* just as the patriots called Monteverde a *tyrant*. But it was only the beginning of the whirlwind. In a few months, José Tomás Boves finished off the States of Venezuela and the East (the country had been divided into two) at the head of a popular insurrection, entered Caracas, and took action without paying any attention to the Captain-General sent from Spain, Juan Manuel Cajigal. Thus, *facto* governments were found on both sides. Once Bolívar and Mariño, they are disregarded by their subordinates Ribas and Piar and sent into exile. Ribas faced Boves, who died in battle, while Ribas was defeated, captured and executed. That is the scene in which Pablo Morillo found himself in 1815 when he arrived from Spain with an army that had the objective of bringing order to both the patriots and the royalists. It becomes wearisome to talk about all the vicissitudes that the republican rebels tried in order to reorganize the republic, but as quickly as in 1816 their guerrillas took shape in the East, and a year later they manage to take all of Guyana after a succession of military successes, especially lead by Manuel Piar. This is where we approach what we are interested in: What was the first thing they thought of? Reorganizing the republic through the convocation of Congresses. This is no small detail for understanding its role in granting legitimacy.

The Congress of Cariaco of 1817 –contemptuously called by the Bolivarian tradition *Congresillo de Cariaco*– partly wanted to redirect the institutionality of 1812, and it was also partly a move to weaken Bolívar's power, incorporating him into a triumvirate with Mariño (that is, Eastern leaders) and Father José Cortés Madariaga, who was more or less a direct link with the first Congress. But Bolívar, almost better in politics than on the battlefield, knew how

to act smartly: his loyal military men disregarded this Congress as a usurpation (another one!), making it self-dissolve, while he called elections to convene another congress, that of Angostura, which met in 1819. It was a maneuver that killed Mariño's aspirations to share power, and that once again called the issue of legitimacy into question. The elections from which his deputies came out were still controversial and were carried out primarily in the headquarters since most of the country was still in royalist hands¹¹. They produced the most important royalist document of the period: *the Manifesto of the Provinces of Venezuela to all the civilized nations of Europe*, dated in Caracas on April 6, 1819, and translated into English and French. It is basically the response of traditional representativeness, expressed in the city councils of the Spanish and Indian cities of the country in royalist hands, to the modern representativeness that somehow was taking place in Angostura. The true representatives of the people, they claimed, were they, and they remained loyal to the King¹². What was happening in Angostura was considered a farce just to enthrone Bolívar.

The *Manifesto* does not put into question whether the elections were fair and competitive. For the *Manifesto*, the problem was the idea of representation itself that it embodied. For these Venezuelans

11 See: Ángel Rafael Almarza, *Los inicios del gobierno representativo en la República de Colombia, 1818-1821* (Madrid, Marcial Pons/Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás Hidalgo, 2017); and Germán Guía Caripe, "El voto militar de 1819: instituido durante las vicisitudes de la Guerra de Independencia", *Heurística*, 11, 2009 (<http://www.saber.ula.ve/bitstream/handle/123456789/30632/articulo7.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>) Retrieved February 3, 2021)

12 The manifesto can be found on the Internet, but it is also reproduced at: Tomás Straka, "Ideas contra un proyecto nacional: los realistas venezolanos, 1810-1821" in Asdrúbal Baptista (Editor), *Suma del pensar venezolano*, Tomo II, Libro 1 (Caracas, Empresas Polar Foundation, 2015) 115-130.

–and there were many– the conclusions of the 1811 deputies were not correct. The representation was corporate and if any congress were to meet, it would have to be that of the councils, or in any case the delegates they appointed. If there were no other tests to confirm to what extent the crux of the independence dispute was institutional, this document would not be needed to prove it.

The Second Congress of Venezuela and the Republic of Colombia

The Second Congress of Venezuela or Congress of Angostura ran with much better fortune than the first. Basically, it took place when the war took a turn towards republican victory. That immediately erased the issue of the legitimacy of their representation raised by the royalists, the doubts about the elections in the barracks, the fact that there were deputies for constituencies where elections could not be held or a notable fact that the *Manifiesto* did not indicate: that being the Congress of Venezuela, it had deputies for Casanare, a province of Nueva Granada. And even more: that in a few months it would decree all of New Granada under the administration of the Venezuelan Congress, dissolve it, self-dissolve Venezuela and declare a new republic, Colombia, now known as Gran Colombia.

Undoubtedly, the enormous success of the Battle of Boyacá and the capture of Santa Fe and the entire center of Nueva Granada allowed such audacious adjustments. The Fundamental Law of Colombia promulgated on December 17, 1819, reads:

The Sovereign Congress of Venezuela, to whose authority the people of New Granada, recently liberated by the arms of the Republic, have voluntarily wanted to submit, and considering:

1. That united in a single Republic the provinces of Venezuela and New Granada have all the proportions and means to rise to the highest degree of power and prosperity;
2. That constituted in separate Republics, no matter how close the ties that unite them, far from taking advantage of so many benefits, would hardly consolidate and enforce its Sovereignty;
3. That these truths, highly penetrated by all men of superior talents and an enlightened patriotism had moved the Governments of the two Republics to agree at their meeting, which the uncertainties of the war made it impossible to verify.

For all these considerations of necessity and reciprocal interest and in accordance with the report of a Special Commission of Deputies of New Granada and Venezuela, in the name and under the auspices of the Supreme Being, the following Fundamental Law of the Republic of Colombia is decreed:

Article 1.- The Republics of Venezuela and New Granada are from this day united in one under the glorious title of Republic of Colombia¹³.

Already in 1813 Bolívar had proposed setting up a Congress that would integrate representatives of Venezuela and New Granada. Although the fact that he was a citizen of New Granada and a very successful officer of the United Provinces in the civil war could have operated in this, the truth is that the idea of some kind of confederation had already been raised by the Caracas and

13 Ley Fundamental de Colombia, 17 de diciembre de 1819 (http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra-visor/ley-fundamental-de-colombia-1819--0/html/ff6c28b0-82b1-11df-acc7-002185ce6064_2.html Retrieved February 2, 2021).

Bogotá boards. In fact, what could be called the first international agreement of Venezuela was the Treaty of Alliance and Federation between the States of Cundinamarca and Venezuela, of May 28, 1810. According to this treaty, Venezuela and Cundinamarca become Co-States, “members of the same political body”, a General Confederation in which they would have similar rights, and to which Popayán, Quito, and Cartagena were expected to join¹⁴.

The project could not be carried out due to the rapid fall of the Venezuelan Republic and the New Granada civil war. Even Cartagena proposed another confederation with Caracas, but now excluding Cundinamarca, with which it was at war¹⁵. Ultimately, the old Viceroyalty was being revived, with whose eastern provinces the Captaincy General of Venezuela had been created three decades earlier. Likewise, a similar conclusion had been reached in Madrid, when Morillo's expedition placed Venezuela and New Granada under its command (although in civil matters, a Captain General and a Viceroy were appointed respectively).

But as there were things that united, others caused the opposite. The intrinsic problem of representativeness and legitimacy that the Angostura Congress had would not take long to charge Colombia for part of its successes. By May 1821, when the new Congress met in the Villa del Rosario de Cúcuta, Colombia already controlled almost all of Nueva Granada, a good part of Venezuela, Maracaibo and Panama (which voluntarily decided to

14 Treaty of Alliance and Federation between the States of Cundinamarca and Venezuela, *Relaciones diplomáticas de Colombia y la Nueva Granada. Tratados y convenios, 1811-1856* (Biblioteca de la Presidencia de la República, Bogotá, 1993), 1-3.

15 A study on the union process between 1810 and 1819: Daniel Gutiérrez Ardila, “De la Confederación de la Tierra Firme a la República de Colombia”, *Anuario de Estudios Bolivarianos*, 15, 2008, 9-50.

join it), but knowing that this was not enough to be legitimate, elections were organized to be much more transparent in 1820. This congress, known as the Cúcuta Congress, was the first (and actually only) Colombian congress since the Angostura Congress was Venezuelan. Its legislative work was very important, and it gave way to the Constitution of 1821 (which is why it is known as the Constitution of Cúcuta). However, once more, the problem of representation did not take long to appear. Caracas and Guayaquil were incorporated into Colombia in the following two years. For both, the process was traumatic, because they were territories with a strong pro-independence vocation, which found themselves with the *fait accompli* of being part of a new State in whose construction they had had little involvement (or none at all, in the case of Guayaquil).

Caracas was incorporated into Colombia after the battle of Carabobo, in June 1821. Although in the beginning, Bolívar's victory quelled any displeasure, when his municipality swore the Constitution of Cúcuta on Christmas Day 1821, it did so by expressing its reservations about certain articles and indicating that it would promote reforms (which were not stipulated in the legal text until 1831, ten years after its promulgation). Later on, the issue of the illegality and illegitimacy of Cúcuta and Angostura would again be brought to light by the separatists. The case of Guayaquil was even more complicated because it involved an independent state that Bolívar basically annexed, occupying it with the army. There were, certainly, other interpretations and the Liberator's motives were not unfounded, but even today the most critical and autonomous Guayaquilists continue to accuse him of having struck and carried out an invasion.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Caracas (1826) and Guayaquil (1827) were the ones that started the two separatist movements in Colombia. Of the two, the first –known as La Cosiata– was the one that would lead the entire republic to an institutional crisis from which it could not recover. While Guayaquil could be subdued by surrounding it with the army and finally occupying it without major problems, Venezuela quickly escalated to another level. Bolívar himself had to go to his native land and display all the skills of a seasoned politician that he was. He understood that there were only two options: either war, in a large country very used to fighting; or make concessions to see if something could be saved. He opted for the latter. First, he granted a frank autonomy, which in reality was nothing more than giving a veneer of legality to what already existed. Thus he named José Antonio Páez, who had become the leader of the rebellion, Superior Military and Civil Chief of Venezuela. It was a position invented to suit him, that is, a recognition of his power. On the other hand, and contrary to what is established by the Constitution, he agreed to call an assembly to make reforms.

These events set off a true chain reaction that would end Colombia in two years. The Ocaña Convention, which was called to reform the constitution and ended in a resounding failure, was a maneuver that led to the proclamation of the Bolívar dictatorship in 1828, and then to the assassination attempt and civil war (uprisings of Obando and de Córdoba), to the war with Peru, which was a bitter victory (it could almost be said that it ended in a draw), and in 1830 to the final action: the secession of Venezuela, the resignation of the Liberator, the *coup d'état* and the dictatorship of Rafael Urdaneta, while Venezuela and later Ecuador were organized as independent states.

The long representative tradition, by way of conclusion

Colombia ended up succumbing to tyranny and anarchy. Its last years were too similar to the Venezuelan and Neo-Granada outbursts of 1812 to 1815. But the fact that this has been tried to be resolved –and in its own way– with the invocation of national representation, indicates that at least this principle was among the things that remained clear after everything that happened. It is true that during the crisis, flashes of the idea of traditional representativeness reappeared, such as Bolívar's appeal to the request of many municipalities to assume the dictatorship in 1828 or Páez's call in November 1830 for Venezuelans to meet in assemblies to express their ideas about what the destiny of the country should be. We have continued to see that in Venezuela, until the days of the Federal War. But the case was what Páez did with the opinion of the most important of the assemblies, the one that took place on November 25 and 26, 1829 in the church of San Francisco de Caracas (and therefore known as the Assembly of San Francisco). As expected, it proposed the separation of the Bogotá government. In response, on January 13, 1830, Páez published several decrees in which he organized the government and called elections for his own Congress, which met in Valencia on May 6 (known as the Valencia Congress)¹⁶.

Once again, the Venezuelan State was born from the meeting of a congress of the representatives of the nation. And once again, it was done in confrontation with other representatives who were outside the country, in this case, the Admirable Congress that would meet in Bogotá on January 20, and those who were no longer considered legitimate. Unlike 1811 or 1819, the nature of

16 About this topic: Elena Plaza, *El patriotismo ilustrado o la organización del estado en Venezuela, 1830-1847* (Caracas, Universidad Central de Venezuela, 2007).

representation is no longer discussed, which is definitely the modern one. But it is clear, once again, that: a) Venezuela is constituted as a State, in the two moments in which it did, based on the principle of representativeness; b) that no matter how much it would be beaten in the next two centuries, and that even continues to be so today, national sovereignty expressed through the vote is the basis of all legitimacy; c) and that this is one of the most important ethical legacies that our founding period left us, the deep root of all aspiration to a representative and democratic government.

Society, parties and elections: how to rebuild political representation?

Héctor Briceño

Democracy today faces a complex paradox. Democratic politics is unimaginable without political parties. Where political parties do not exist or are very weak, democracy does not work well. Simultaneously, parties are the most questioned political institutions in the world. They are credited with most (if not all) of the problems democracies face: corruption, injustice, abuse of power, inequality, poverty, backwardness, underdevelopment, misery. It is not surprising, therefore, that the majority of citizens have great mistrust towards them.

The World Values Survey¹ ratifies this, a study carried out periodically since 1981 with a current coverage close to 90% of the world population, distributed in 79 countries (illustrated in Figure 1). According to the data, the portion of interviewees that mistrust political parties in the world is not only greater than the portion that does trust them, but it also seems like mistrust is deepening overtime. While in the early nineties half of those interviewed (53%) expressed their reservations regarding parties,

1 See: <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>

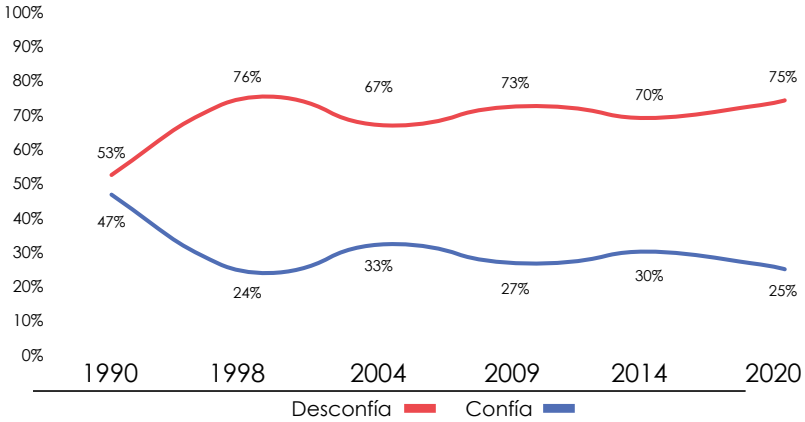
30 years later, at the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, distrust has extended to three-quarters parts (75%).

In political life, however, there are no gaps. Social functions must be performed, and when one institution loses legitimacy, another takes its place. We thus find that great efforts are being made everywhere to replace parties, while Think Tanks are trying to decipher the keys to a democracy without parties². The media besiege them, denouncing the dark motives and interests behind their decisions.

They are also hunted down by social movements, businessmen, social organizations, and a long etcetera, waiting for the opportunity to prove their suitability as substitutes. Anti-party leaders are everywhere today, presenting themselves as the alternative to end the evils suffered by democracies. Their speeches, despite the different situations, contexts and even countries, are always suspiciously similar: replacing political parties and elites in order to allow the people, together with their true and legitimate leaders, to govern for their own benefit.

2 See: <https://horizontal.mx/bienvenidos-la-era-de-los-post-partidos-politicos/>; <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/19/politics-without-parties-citizens-initiatives-tax-havens-abortion-corruption-spain-mortgage-civil-society/>; https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/is-this-the-end-of-political-parties/2019/02/22/39b46568-36aa-11e9-854a-7a14d7fec96a_story.html.

Figure 1. Trust in political parties in the world, 1989 - 2020



Source: World Values Survey, own calculations. The red line represents distrust, while blue, trust.

This type of speech is very familiar in Venezuela. The leaders that govern the country since 1999 built their project on the promise of eliminating political parties and with them all the evils of democracy: “If these parties are completely rotten, then they will disappear, a necessary action to reorder the political system”³, announced Hugo Chávez in an interview months before winning the 1998 presidential elections.

Indeed, during the early years of Chavismo, the center of the government's political action revolved around a large number of social organizations of different kinds: social movements, cooperatives, political circles, community committees, community councils, among many others, while opposition political action was not very different. The media, the military, businessmen, workers, social organizations

3 Own translation. You can see the original in <http://www.todochavez.gob.ve/todochavez/2339-programa-especial-conversatorio-del-comandante-presidente-hugo-chavez-con-periodistas>, consulted on 29.01.2021.

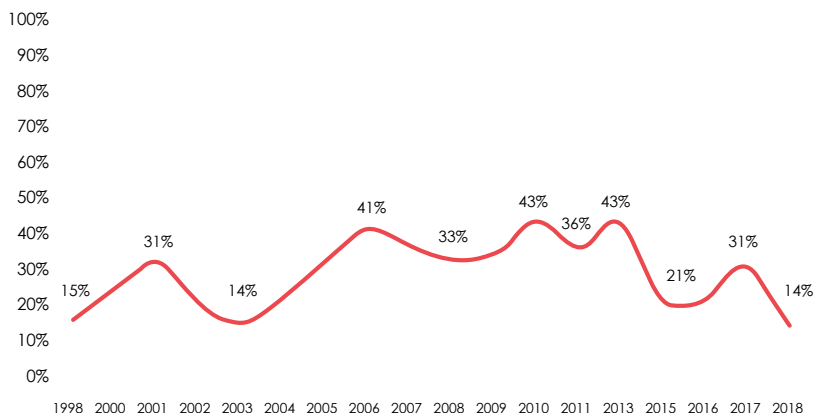
and even the Catholic Church displaced the delegitimized opposition parties in the political conflict against the government.

However, in 2006, Chavismo decided to reverse its discourse and organize all its political action, from then on, around a new political party. “I am going to create a new party. The [allied] parties that [do not] want [to unite], go forth (...), [but] of course you would not be a part of the Government (...) I want a single party to govern with me”. This is how President Hugo Chávez announced the formation of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), a political organization impossible to tell apart from the State itself.

This pivotal new discourse, however, was not able to reverse his own work, crystallized institutionally in the 1999 Constitution, which replaced the term *political parties* with the vague concept of *organizations with political ends*, while at the same time strictly prohibited public financing to political parties, political activities and electoral campaigns. It also failed to reverse the Venezuelan distrust in political parties, which after a period of increase and great volatility still remains after 20 years in the same scale as in 1998, as can be seen in Figure 2.

In the years shown in Figure 2, trust towards parties experienced a stage of increase associated with the electoral cycles (the highest points correspond in fact to presidential electoral processes, referendums and parliamentarians). However, after the progressive loss of confidence in elections as a mechanism for political change, trust in political parties returned to its lowest in 2018, suggesting that the valuation of parties is closely associated with elections. Venezuelan political parties are socially valued based on their competition for political power through elections.

Figure 2. Trust in political parties. Venezuela, 1998-2018



Note: The graph groups together the responses “A lot” and “Some” to the question: How much trust do you have in political parties? Would you say you trust them a lot, some, little or nothing at all?

Source: *Latinobarómetro*, own calculations.

The functions of political parties in democracy

The electoral role is the distinctive and original character of political parties. In it, the representative function that makes modern democracy possible is specified. However, for representation to take place effectively, parties must perform a broader set of functions:

1. Identify, add and channel demands;
2. Design and promote public policies;
3. Recruit and nominate candidates;
4. Mobilize support and stimulate the participation of the electorate;
5. Create governments;
6. Orient public opinion; and

7. Integrate citizens into the political system and ultimately into the Nation-State⁴

Currently, parties are not the only institutions that play these roles. Social movements, constituencies, the media, universities, civil society organizations, unions, among many others, perform, with varying degrees of effectiveness, several of the traditional functions of parties. Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to point out that representation is not the exclusive responsibility of parties, but of all those actors who exercise political functions. Universities, for example, play a fundamental role in the formation of leaders, while the media is central in the formation of public opinion, and civil society organizations and trade unions, in the identification and aggregation of demands.

This implies that for political representation and representative democracy to function properly there must be a balance of forces (symmetry) between social actors. Political parties require a strong civil society that facilitates the representative function by participating in the process of identification and aggregation of demands, while acting as instances of social control and counterweight of parties.

Political parties, like all social organizations, tend to expand their power to other sectors of society. If civil society is not strong enough to resist them, parties run the risk of conquering it and imposing their own dynamics, producing a corrosive clientelistic redundancy that destroys both civil society and parties. For this reason, for parties to be successful and to be able to effectively exercise their role of representation they depend on a solid, independent and autonomous civil society.

4 Larry Diamond & R Gunther, *Political Parties and Democracy*, (January 1, 2001), 1-391.

Thus, what has been called *partycracy*, a system in which the power of parties expands beyond their natural borders to dominate social life, obstructing the functioning of democracy⁵, is, from this point of view, both a manifestation of the expansive power of parties as of the weakness of civil society.

Parties must represent and channel social demands, so they are obliged to build bridges with other organizations that allow them to identify and systematize interests in public policy proposals. The stronger civil society and its organizations, the more easily needs can be identified, processed and transformed into public policies. Representation, in short, becomes hampered when the relationship between representatives and represented is disproportionately asymmetric or unequal. However, even when the relationship between the two is symmetrical, the process of political representation is complex. Symmetry is a necessary but not sufficient condition for democratic representation.

The distinctive characteristic of modern society, including Venezuelan society, is the growing diversification of identities that complicates the process of political representation and, even more so, social integration⁶. However, political parties are organizations designed in 19th century society in order to represent social, economic and religious cleavages that today seem to have no validity⁷. How to reconcile such a magnitude of identities and interests in the same

5 Michael Coppedge, "Partidocracia y reforma en una perspectiva comparativa", in Andrés Serbín and others (eds). *Venezuela: La democracia bajo presión* (Caracas, Invesp-North-South Center, University of Miami-Editorial Nueva Sociedad, 1993), 142.

6 Indeed, one of the most important threats democracies face today is the weakening of the idea of political community as a consequence of progressive fragmentation, to the point that many citizens do not recognize each other as members of the same country.

7 Seymour Lipset & Stein Rokkan (eds) *Party system and voter alignments* (New York: Free Press, 1967).

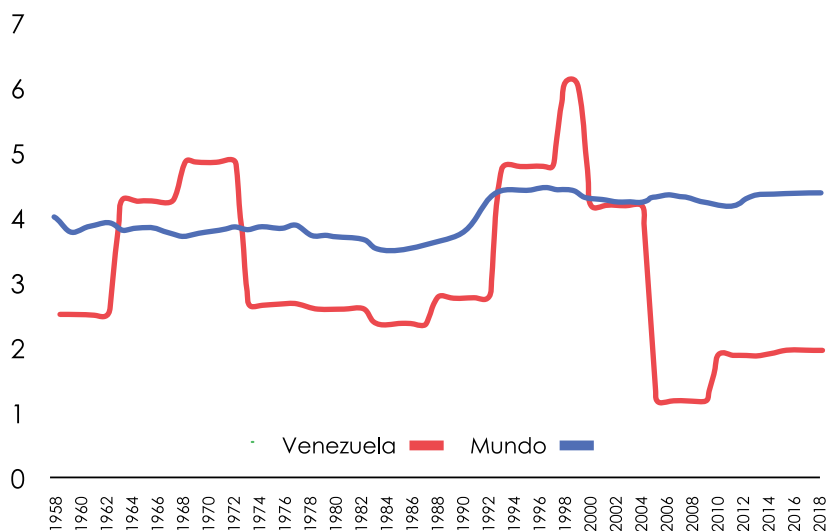
political organization? How to prioritize demands? The representation process is in crisis, because what needs to be represented (society) is increasingly complex and diverse, and the institutions in charge of representing (political parties) have not been able to adapt their operating structures to the level of current social complexity.

The main response to this process has been the diversification of the political offer. It seems to be a global trend that modern plural societies demand diversity of political parties. This has caused, after a long period of relative stability in party systems, a rising number of political parties at least since the early 1990s across the globe (see Figure 3, effective number of electoral parties), modifying the dynamics of party systems functioning, making decision-making processes and public policy formation more complex.

However, the expansion of the political offer has not solved the problems of representation by itself. The Venezuelan electoral data serve to illustrate it. In the 2010 parliamentary elections, 256 political organizations presented candidates (mostly grouped in the two major government alliances –*Polo Patriótico*– and opposition –*Mesa de la Unidad Democrática*–), although only 11 of them received a vote equal to or greater than 1% of the votes.

An electoral political offer that is too broad, far from improving representation, tends to worsen it, confusing the population at best, atomizing it at worst, and strengthening the largest minorities. It does not seem then that the answer is just to create more parties, but rather ensuring parties that are more similar to society.

Figure 3. Effective number of electoral parties, in Venezuela and the world. 1958 - 2018



Source: Bormann & Golder (2013), Briceño (2013, 2017), own calculations

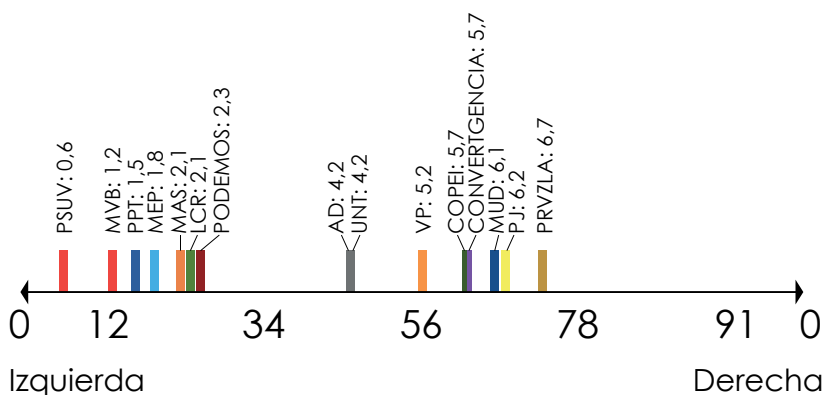
Still, it should not be forgotten that any process of representation is mediated by political institutions, especially by the laws that regulate political parties and electoral processes, in which the relationship between the contradictory principles of representation, social fragmentation and governance is outlined⁸. Electoral formulas define the winners and losers of electoral contests, as well as how many parties can compete for power, in which circuits, and with what means. Political institutions also define the size of parliaments and other collegiate bodies, as well as the majorities necessary for decision-making. In short, a distinction must be made between

8 Nohlen, Dieter (2007) "Sistemas electorales Presidenciales y Parlamentarios", pp. 294-333, in: Nohlen, Dieter; Zovatto, Daniel; Orozco, Jesús & Thompson, José (Compiladores), *Tratado de Derecho Electoral comparado de América Latina*, IDEA/Fondo de Cultura Económica, México.

democratic institutional models that encourage governance and those that encourage greater representation⁹.

In Venezuela, the democratic institutional model established in 1958, characterized by privileging conciliation between elites¹⁰ and, secondly, the satisfaction of popular demands, was progressively replaced since the arrival of Chavismo in 1999 by a hegemonic authoritarian regime, characterized by stimulating polarization and confrontation as a mechanism for the imposition of political decisions, in which the only recognized demands –i.e. the only represented demands– are those of the power bloc and its allied economic rings.

Figure 4. Political parties on the Left (izquierda) - Right (derecha) scale



Note 1: Graph results represent the average of the responses of the academic experts, by placing each party on the left and right scale. Only political parties that have received at least 5% of the vote in an election between 1970 and 2019 are included.

9 Arend Lijphart, *Modelos de democracia. Formas de gobierno y resultados en treinta y seis países* (Barcelona: Editorial Ariel, 2000).

10 Juan Carlos Rey, "La democracia venezolana y la crisis del sistema populista de conciliación", in *Revista de Estudios Políticos*, no 74 (1991): 533-578.

Note 2: The scale used by V-Party, which varies between extreme left (0) and extreme right (6), was adjusted to a scale of 0 to 10 points.

Source: V-Party & Global Party Survey, own calculations.

The polarization system, however, has not been limited to the political sphere, but has been deliberately expanded to all spaces of society in order to prevent the construction of any social consensus that evidences the possibility of an alternative form of solidarity that could undermine the legitimacy of the Chavista domination model.

The Chavista political system is an institutional model designed with the explicit objective of demolishing the representation system, its main actors (political parties), as well as the democratic society that supports it. Therefore, rebuilding the representation system of democracy in Venezuela faces the construction of inclusive and representative social and institutional spaces that demonstrate the possibility of alternative decision-making mechanisms, based on consensus building and democratic values, as its main challenge.

Parties and elections

The main form of relationship between political parties and Venezuelan society since 1998 has been through elections.

Chavismo took advantage of the popularity of Hugo Chávez since he came to power to cement, through elections, the foundations of the new political system, generating an intense electoral cycle. During the period between 1998 and 2015, five presidential elections, five parliamentary elections, five referendums, and the election of a constituent took place in Venezuela. Additionally, four regional and four municipal elections were held. For this reason, it is not an exaggeration to affirm that the political struggle in Venezuela was settled during this phase of Chavismo at the polls and that the political

parties were constantly forced to prioritize the electoral pathway over any other form of relationship with society.

However, the prevailing electoral support that Chavismo received at the polls, at least until 2012, was never enough to impose, by itself, the political hegemony to which the Chavista project aspired, for which it had to constantly manipulate electoral institutions to maximize the benefit of their support, perfecting “the paradoxical art of destroying democracy through elections”¹¹, turning elections into the main mechanism of national and international legitimation of the new regime.

The overwhelming victory of Chavismo during the election of the members of the National Constituent Assembly in 1999 demonstrated very early on the magnitude of this challenge. On that occasion, Chavismo obtained, with 66% of the votes, 95% of the seats, thanks to the normative design aimed at making the most of the Chavista electorate, by imposing a double majority electoral system (of multi-member regional constituencies and a national constituency of open lists) alien to the Venezuelan democratic tradition and experience. To this we must also add the vote distribution strategy (known as *quiniela*) implemented by Hugo Chávez's party, the Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) and the great discipline shown by his followers, who obeyed the call of the leadership, showing a vote of confidence between the Chavista and opposition parties and their respective sympathizers.

The Chavista electoral strategy forced the opposition parties to privilege elections as a form of bonding with society over any other strategy, and the electoral coordination between parties over any other form of political relationship. Thus, the most relevant

11 Moisés Naím & Francisco Toro, “Venezuela: los progresistas del mundo no pueden seguir callados”, in *El país* (Spain). Available in: https://elpais.com/internacional/2016/07/09/actualidad/1468099480_304349.html, consultado el 09.02.2021.

opposition political alliances of Chavismo's 20 years in power have been fundamentally spaces for electoral coordination. The most important of them, the *Mesa de la Unidad Democrática* (MUD, 2008-2018), was a successful alliance that managed to reverse the electoral roles of Chavismo and the opposition in just 10 years, until the opposition political parties became an absolute majority in the 2015 parliamentary elections, despite the official electoral advantage and manipulation.

The organizational structure of the MUD, however, was built on the basis of the electoral performance of the member parties, which resulted in a tautological internal tension that stimulated a continuous struggle for hegemony within the bloc, a struggle that was fought with (and by) the available resources of the platform, reducing the action of the parties to a double competition: internal hegemony and external survival.

The electoral cycle of 1998-2015 also strengthened political polarization, by progressively reducing the political spectrum to the antagonistic Chavismo-opposition dichotomy, consolidated on the axis of struggle "maintaining power" (Chavismo) versus "removing the government" (opposition), also reducing political representation to the exclusive representation of polarization itself, subordinating any social demand to its own logic. In the opposing case, the representation of polarization was transformed into the representation of the demand for a change of government, an objective against which any other demand was subject. Furthermore, some social demands came to be perceived as opposing or as obstacles to the change of government, so that their recognition, inclusion and representation were systematically denied.

Society, for its part, perfectly understood this dynamic, adapting its identities to it, also reducing its own demands to the aspiration

of political change. Those who approached the opposition parties primarily sought representation in the struggle for political power. Social sectors that, for various reasons, were willing or had the possibility to postpone their economic and social demands¹², until the political goal was achieved.

The enormous volatility of support within the opposition bloc expresses precisely the role played by the demand for representation of political change among opposition sympathizers. Between 1998 and 2013, each party that exercised electoral leadership was seen as the main representative of the demand for change, which is why it tended to concentrate the majority of electoral support within the bloc. In 1998 the Venezuela Project Party (PRVZLA) of the presidential candidate Enrique Salas Römer, obtained 72% of the votes of the main opposition alliance¹³. In the 2000 presidential elections, the main opposition political parties decided not to present a candidate, and the responsibility fell on the controversial military man Francisco Arias Cárdenas, a comrade in arms of Hugo Chávez during the 1992 coup, who served as governor of the Zulia state, a position that he had won with the votes of the MVR party, led by Hugo Chávez. His candidacy was supported by a group of small opposition parties, the most important of which was La Causa R (LCR), which concentrated 51% of the votes of the circumstantial alliance.

2006 was the year for Un Nuevo Tiempo's (UNT) turn, presidential candidate Manuel Rosales's party, becoming the main opposition party by obtaining 36% of all the votes of the opposition alliance. In the 2012 presidential elections, the candidate Henrique Capriles Radonski, a member of the Primero Justicia party, took the leadership

12 A decision that involved both political culture and certain social conditions.

13 Made up of 4 parties, Proyecto Venezuela, Acción Democrática, COPEI, and Por Querer a la Ciudad.

of the coalition by concentrating 28% of the total alliance¹⁴. In 2013 the opposition coalition would participate jointly under the exclusive identity of the Democratic Unity Table, to concentrate 100% of the alliance's votes. In summary, the great volatility of internal support in this alliance expresses the representation of the aspiration for political change; a demand that has not been the exclusive property of any party, but of the alliance of parties, temporarily administered by the leadership of the day within the coalition.

For their part, those social sectors that did not identify with extreme political polarization were systematically excluded from the system of representation. Sectors defined as not aligned with either side, independent, among many other categories that describe non-polarized groups, have always shown an equal or greater interest in issues other than the axis of the Chavista-opposition polarization: maintaining power (Chavismo) vs. remove the government (opposition).

Opposition electoral coordination spaces, defined on the basis of polarization, were always unable to represent external demands to the dynamics of polarization. The ideological diversity of opposition parties that coexisted in the opposition ranks made it impossible to agree on political projects beyond the rescue of democracy. Discussions about different models of society, development models, public policies, international alliances, for example, were constantly postponed to prioritize the fight for democracy, turning this common denominator of the alliance (the fight to rescue democracy) into the only possible expression, not only of the alliance but of any opposition party, obstructing the expression of the political identities

14 However, this year the MUD electoral coalition presented its own electoral identity on the ballot, obtaining 34% of the votes of the entire opposition alliance, surpassing all opposition parties, including the party of candidate Henrique Capriles.

of each party, ignoring social demands that could endanger internal consensus.

Table 1. Ideological distance, measures of central tendency. 2016

		PSUV	MUD
Chavistas	Mean	-0,3397	-
	Variance	9,745	-
	SD	3,1216	-
	Standard error of the mean	0,2159	-
	Kurtosis	1,964	-
	Asymmetry	-0,049	-
	N	209	-
Opposition	Mean	-	-0,7713
	Variance	-	9,672
	SD	-	3,1099
	Standard error of the mean	-	0,1223
	Kurtosis	-	1,074
	Asymmetry	-	-0,107
	N	-	647
Neither	Mean	1,0761	-0,5649
	Variance	15,11	14,31
	SD	3,8875	3,7829
	Standard error of the mean	0,2287	0,2241
	Kurtosis	0,203	0,340
	Asymmetry	-0,156	0,161
	N	289	285

Note: The questions used in the study are: 1. Nowadays, when talking about political tendencies, many people talk about those who are more sympathetic to the left or the right. Based on how the terms "left" and "right" mean to you when you think about your political point of view, where would you be on a scale from 1 to 10 where 1 means left and 10 means right? 2. Using this same

scale, where would you place the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV)?

3. And where would you locate the Table of Democratic Unity (MUD)?

Source: LAPOP 2016, own calculations.

Fuente: LAPOP 2016, cálculos propios.

Table 1 shows an approach to polarized representation based on the analysis of the ideology of parties and voters. Based on the Barometer of the Americas (LAPOP) study carried out by Vanderbilt University¹⁵, we compared the results of self-placement on the left-right scale in contrast to the position that the interviewees assigned to PSUV and the MUD on the same scale, segmented according to the intention to vote: Chavistas, opponents and non-aligned.

The distribution analysis of the differences between both placements shows that, indeed, voters from both parties, PSUV (Chavistas) and MUD (opposition), have relatively similar distribution measures. The ideology assigned to a party by each interviewee from said party, is very similar to their own ideology, thus fulfilling the assumption of ideological representation by proximity.

The non-aligned group, however, exhibits measures that are very different from those assigned to the PSUV, but similar to those assigned to the MUD, with an average (mean) even lower than that of the MUD voters themselves. This shows that, although the MUD could represent them by ideological proximity, it failed to meet their expectations outside the spectrum of political polarization.

Representation and hopelessness. Some conclusions.

The dynamics of the Venezuelan political conflict escalated to an even higher level after the opposition victory in the parliamentary elections of December 2015, radically transforming the relationship between parties and elections.

¹⁵ Ver: <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/>

The loss of Chavismo's electoral effectiveness, reflected that year in a 56% to 41% vote in favor of the opposition, showed the Maduro-led government since 2013 that advantageousness and electoral manipulation were no longer sufficient to maintain power. He then decided to further undermine political and electoral conditions, drastically and unconstitutionally modifying electoral rules, outlawing the main opposition parties, persecuting, imprisoning and even torturing party leaders. However, Chavismo did not stop holding elections despite the new conditions and growing popular rejection, proof of the important role they play in maintaining legitimacy vis-à-vis their own allies, both internal and external. Thus, between 2017 and 2020, four electoral processes were held, namely the 2017 National Constituent Assembly, the 2017 regional elections, the 2018 presidential elections and the 2020 parliamentary elections.

As a consequence of the deterioration of political conditions, voters and opposition political parties progressively lost trust in voting as a mechanism for political change, refusing to participate in almost all of them, except in the 2017 regional elections. This position, however, brought forth the interruption of the traditional link between society and parties, generating a new problem: in the absence of competitive elections, how would parties and society be linked? and more importantly, what are the functions of political parties in an undemocratic political system? And what should political parties do?

First, parties are obliged to reconnect with the demands of the broad and diverse Venezuelan society, especially with all those that have been postponed during the long Chavismo years: Social, ecological, economic, development demands, justice, equality, security, inclusion, recognition. However, this reconnection with society should not occur from a populist perspective of

equalization and dissolution of all demands in a thick, abstract and homogenizing idea of "people", but from a broad democratic perspective that rescues the value of a plural society, equal in rights, but diverse in identities.

Parties are also obliged to make political representation effective, channeling and transforming social demands into concrete proposals for public policies and draft laws that stimulate public opinion and citizens in general, a debate around specific public policies tied always to the democratic political project.

Authoritarian regimes are characterized by the exclusion of the demands and preferences of the great majority in privilege, of the allied economic, military and political elites. Democracy, in contrast, is characterized by recognizing all demands on an equal footing. For this reason, political representation is a phenomenon that only becomes effective in a democratic political system. In today's Venezuela, however, political representation cannot be subordinated to system change. On the contrary, the political representation of diverse social identities is a requirement for political change.

Finally, political parties are obliged to rescue the elections as a fighting mechanism for the reconquest of democracy. The data presented in this study clearly show that the relationship between parties and society is strengthened through electoral processes, and not by chance. During elections, parties get closer to the citizens to dialogue, to listen to them and convey their proposals. They construct messages to highlight the capabilities of both their programs and projects, and their leaders. When parties are democratic, they direct a message not only to their followers, but also to their adversaries, trying to convince them or, if not, to propose coexistence, promoting cooperation networks and

stimulating social solidarity. Reestablishing the electoral pathway as a mechanism to fight for political change generates solid and deep social bases for the subsequent construction of a more solid democratic system.

In the absence of elections, on the contrary, mistrust and despair grow. Parties grow apart and society turns to search for new and more suitable actors to represent them in other political spaces.

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

Guillermo Tell Aveledo Coll

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", "partycracy", "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 partycracy". 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.

Edinson Ferrer: “We must serve citizens and fight for elections”

Pedro Pablo Peñaloza

Venezuelan political parties are going through dark times. Or red. Nicolás Maduro’s regime is executing a plan of harassment and demolition that aims to erase them from the map. Its leaders are disabled, persecuted, imprisoned or forced into exile. Their acronyms and cards are stolen. They are outlawed and declared “terrorists.” And they are denied the minimum conditions to put up a fight on the ground they know best: the electoral one.

Faced with an adversary who does not respect the minimum standards of democratic play and the anti-party discourse that even feeds on its errors, the secretary of the national organization of Primero Justicia Edinson Ferrer (Maracaibo, 1982) points out that political organizations should strengthen their ties with citizens and enhance their vocation of service to promote the transition to freedom in Venezuela.

- Are parties like Primero Justicia, which are formed and developed under democratic principles, prepared to face the challenge posed by an authoritarian regime?

Primero Justicia is a party that was born with an absolute democratic spirit. Facing an authoritarian regime, we must rethink our ways of acting precisely by recognizing the environment in which

we are in order to strengthen our structures while at the same time we fight to rescue democracy.

At this time, democracy does not exist in the country, which is a challenge for building efficient ways of doing politics. Political activism, standing in street corners, going house to house, social complaint, everything has to be adapted. It is not just about looking for a position.

For Primero Justicia, there are two strong things in development. The first thing is to accompany the citizen. We, Venezuelans, want free and transparent elections, but we also want to be able to live. We need our leadership to be by our neighbors' side when facing their problems and when looking for solutions. This accompaniment to the citizen is vital, and thus, little by little, we have been strengthening our militants in that sense. In parallel, we have been structuring the political fight to rescue democracy. Obviously, it represents a challenge because it is not the natural way of working for a political party under democratic conditions.

- How should democratic parties act in an environment marked by the persecution and violation of fundamental rights?

We have to focus on the essence. A political party should not exist just to participate in elections and win. Of course, we have a vocation for power, and we want to reach that place through free elections in order to transform society from there. We have always told our leaders that we do not want to hold power per se, but rather transform and humanize Venezuelan society.

Amid this environment of persecution and violation of fundamental rights, we are committed to strengthening our team, not

to be a political machine, but to be human, to be people. That is why we have strengthened the body of the party, but also its soul.

The body is the structure, the militancy, the people made of flesh and blood in each community, the vigilante at all levels of the organizations that helps to build and organize the citizens themselves. Our goal is to accompany our neighbors in the construction of solutions.

The soul lies in the righteous feeling that our people live according to our values of solidarity, search for peace, putting people first, making the militant feel that we are there to solve Venezuelans' problems.

In this way, we have to strengthen political parties along with our fight for free elections. We cannot neglect the internal strengthening of the parties. If we manage to make all the parties in Venezuela strong, to ensure there are militants and leaders in all municipalities and parishes and that those leaders are trained to serve, once we manage to rescue democracy, the most difficult work will already have been done. With organized citizens, we can win the elections and rebuild the country.

- The regime has judicially intervened parties and taken away their cards and symbols. How to maintain the identity and the link with the militancy amid these outrages?

In the case of Primero Justicia, we have always told vigilantes that our vocation as political leaders has to be to serve our neighbors, to put human beings first. That is why we are a central-humanist party.

We see power as a tool to be able to serve our neighbors and citizens with much more strength. But the purpose cannot be to win an election, the goal must be to be able to rebuild and humanize

Venezuelan society. As a party, we have always instilled those values. After 21 years since the party was created, having our card or name taken away is not an issue, since there is already a sense of belonging in our leadership and membership.

It is not a selfish sense of belonging, it is a sense of understanding that whoever calls themselves a vigilante is clearly dedicated to serving. That is why we have greatly strengthened the training of our leadership, to remain in our course of serving all Venezuelans. All the political and judicial games of the regime to try to hit the spirits of the leadership fail because there is already a sense of belonging in this fight.

Beyond these stunts, we have defined several lines of action to maintain cohesion. The first axis is training. We keep up an education that is not only academic but also human, of vocation, understanding that we decided to be in Primero Justicia to accompany others. Since the priority of our citizens is currently for free and transparent elections be held in Venezuela, we are of course committed to achieving that goal.

Secondly, we maintain permanent activism. Our vigilantes are always asked to visit their neighbors, discuss what is happening and listen to the citizens. This feedback strengthens a bond that keeps us informed of what is happening in all communities.

Thirdly, we always hold weekly meetings with each of the party structures throughout the country. This helps to keep an identity knowing that there is a national leadership that provides guidelines and is attentive to our continuing to grow as people, always remembering that the vocation is to serve the people.

We have social programs and various secretariats –female, family, youth, defense of workers, union, citizen security, “justice in

the street"— accompanying all sectors of Venezuelan society, not only those within our structures.

- Elections are critical to the organization, mobilization, and dissemination of party projects. To what extent has the decision not to participate in the last elections weakened the democratic parties?

From a formal point of view, there have been no elections. I think this has been understood not only by our leadership but by all Venezuelans. There have been political events that the regime calls elections but that do not meet the requirements to be so. They have the name, but not the content to be an election.

Our purpose is not to get to office, but to transform Venezuelan society. If that is our main goal, there are sacrifices and examples that we must make. Among our ranks is one of the great examples in that sense, which is Juan Pablo Guanipa, who won the governorship of the state of Zulia. That decision taken by Juan Pablo Guanipa to not recognize the fraudulent National Constituent Assembly shows what a vigilante is. We are training political leaders to rebuild the Venezuela that we all want, to transform and humanize politics in our country, where there is a real bond between Venezuelans and leaders.

We have a vocation for power to transform Venezuela, but that happens first by ensuring that there are free and transparent elections, that the institutions really work, that the public forces have autonomy, and that the legal framework is respected.

The citizen knows that our fight is for there to be a real electoral process, where Venezuelans not only go to vote but also to choose, that the vote is to decide. Venezuelans want to decide who should govern the destiny of the nation, that is why our struggle continues

to focus on being able to rescue the vote as a decision factor and hold free elections.

- Does abstention end up blurring parties that only know how to fight in the electoral field?

I think we have to train our leadership to deeply understand what the struggle of a political party is. The most valuable instrument is to come to power through the vote to rebuild and make life much easier for Venezuelans who, in the end, vote to improve their quality of life.

But in an authoritarian regime where the struggle is for free and transparent elections to be held, the political parties must deepen their vocation of service, even when we are not in power. Our political leadership must be formed to understand that our vocation is to serve from where we are.

The fact that there have not been free elections hits the spirits of all citizens because people want to decide, but that is where we have to train leaders who are always there to serve others. In the end, the political leader is the one who makes dreams a reality, and we have to do that conversion whether we have a position of power or not.

Obviously, our goal is to have popularly elected positions thanks to the trust of citizens, because we can do much more from there, but not having a position cannot be an obstacle to our vocation of service in the communities.

We at Primero Justicia have groups of lawyers who provide free legal advice throughout the country, as well as doctors and medical students from recent years, and dentists who provide care. Citizens must be served, while also continuing the political fight for free

elections. What you cannot do as a party is sitting still while fighting for elections.

- In recent times, it has become fashionable in Venezuelan politics to speak of "scorpions», or *alacrán*, pointing out that the regime has bought out leaders of the Venezuelan opposition. When making a self-critical evaluation of this situation, what share of responsibility do the parties have in this? Why did the parties not foresee that this could happen?

This happens in all families, but of course, you can always do things better, you can always have better controls for people who are going to reach positions of popular election.

We have worked on these types of controls through our disciplinary court and our training officers so that this does not happen again. However, what stands out is that with all the millions that the regime spent to buy these scorpions in different parties, they cannot reverse the illegitimacy of what they are doing. On the contrary, they confirmed what they are: an authoritarian regime that wants to buy determinations through money and corruption.

We must have many more controls over the men and women who are going to represent our parties and citizens. They must be the best in comprehensive and human training, in leadership, in a vocation for service, we all have to work on that. The important thing is to be honest and sincere, and to understand the authoritarian attitude of the regime that through money, blackmail and persecution will continue to seek to break the unity of the parties and the opposition.

Each party has the duty to strengthen its own body and soul, to have a clear identity, to have leaders feel that they are there, that

they are a family, and that they are very clear about their values and principles.

We have the responsibility to organize the parties in all sectors because when we achieve a free and transparent election, we have to win it in unity. We have to defend and deepen democracy so that all Venezuelans have a greater quality of life and progress. That is only possible if we have strong political parties. There is no democracy in the world that will survive if it does not have strong political parties.

And when I speak of strong political parties, I am not only referring to having men and women throughout the national territory, that is the body, but they also have to have a soul, principles, values, training, and a vocation for service.

- Does the exhaustion of being in the opposition without having the prospect of reaching positions of power in the short term affect the discipline of the parties?

The continuous fight for free elections always gives an impression that those elections are just around the corner. Our leadership sees that this change is close. If you are fighting for something, you have to be prepared for when you achieve that goal. If we are fighting for free and transparent elections, it would be disrespectful if we are not prepared to win them. That is why we all have to organize ourselves, not just the parties.

When you decide to be a political leader, you decide to take a step for the common good. You are committing yourself not only to citizens but also to God and yourself, because from that moment on you will be taking care of everyone.

In *Primero Justicia*, there are always many ideas that are discussed internally, which is part of democracy. Although the forms may

change from one person to another, the goal is the same: to achieve free and transparent elections. Therefore, we tie that objective with the discipline of the party. When they see us organizing ourselves, forming us in that continuous work, it is because while we fight for the goal, it is also our responsibility to Venezuelans to be prepared and to have the best men and women to represent them in those free and transparent elections.

- Like so many other times, the unity of the opposition is once again at the center of the debate. What should the parties do to promote consensus building and end internal fights?

In the union of all of us who want this to change, there is the strength to keep moving forward. Primero Justicia has always been clear about this and that is why we have made all the necessary efforts to confront the regime in unity.

Unity will always merit efforts and sacrifices. We have to put aside our individual or collective aspirations as a party. We must understand that the only objective, the only candidate that unity must have today must be called conditions for a free and transparent electoral process. We have to get all Venezuelans to unite based on conditions that allow us to go to a free and transparent electoral process.

There may be different ideas and ways of doing things and all of them must be respected, the important thing is to have the necessary analysis to know when it can be worked in one way or another. But we must always understand that we are all democrats and what we know how to do is politics to serve Venezuelans.

The best way we have today to serve Venezuelans is for them to see us fighting for what they want most, electing a new president and all positions through free and transparent elections. We want to choose, not just vote, and to choose we need conditions. If we

understand that this is our only path, to achieve conditions for free and transparent elections, I am sure that the consensus will come alone, because when the objective is very clear, the ideas will come together until it is achieved.

- For unity, the parties have had to put aside their particular agendas, support other people's leaderships and even sacrifice their symbols to get all under a single card. Is unity for the parties too demanding?

On the contrary, I believe that unity is a necessity for everyone because it what allows us to build together towards our common goal. But that unity cannot break the identity of each of the parties. Each party has a personality, a way of being, and adds value from its strength.

As vigilantes, our lifestyle is designed to serve the community, always putting the person first, being in solidarity, seeking peace and justice, that is our style. Then, if your lifestyle is to serve the citizen and be aware of how to work the problems to solve, there is continuous activism. Each game has its quality, its personality, its strength, and when you add all the pieces within the unit, then you are gaining strength.

If we build unity in a strategic way, aware of where each one should be, it is very strong. Unity cannot break the identity of each party. When we rescue democracy, we are going to need that political diversity, that plurality for Venezuelans to decide as it is done in the great democracies of the world.

Unity will always make us all strong, as long as the particles of that whole are also strong. Unity has to be dedicated at this time to achieving a free and transparent electoral process together. My call to citizens who have never been in politics is that they review within

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the range of parties that make life in democratic unity the ideas that they feel they can build something, and that they come work together with us.

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.

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