

The redefinition of multipartidism in Venezuela

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Political parties in Venezuela have a close and historical relationship with participation and political leadership in their daily work as institutions of the political order of society, in their relations with the State, and in their daily development through citizens, groups of interest, unions, guilds, student bodies, and even neighborhoods, if I may.

Their manifestations are historical since 1936 with the democratic opening spearheaded by General Isaías López Contreras's government (1936-1941) after General Juan Vicente Gómez's (1857-1935) passing, when, following his personalistic and dictatorial rule since 1908, the at the time incipient trade union and business movements, as well as student –especially college– demonstrations, awakened aspirations and new anti-dictatorial and democratic values in Venezuela. A society interested in joining the modernization and expansion of its organizational needs and aspirations, which had already been making a dent in the autocratic behaviors of old authorities, fostered a new political and social reasoning of significance in the country.

The Venezuelan political system already had the space for more adequate and convenient development of its public institutions and authorities, which supported and promoted a new

type of politics. New parties arose, such as *Acción Democrática* (Democratic Action, AD), founded in 1941 and whose antecedents as a political group date to 1931 as the *Agrupación Revolucionaria de Izquierda* (Left Revolutionary Group, ARDI), then to the *Movimiento de Organización Venezolana* (Venezuelan Organization movement) in 1936, and later as the *Partido Democrático Nacional* (National Democratic Party, PDN).

Another party with strong local roots was the *Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente* (Independent Electoral Political Organization Committee, COPEI), founded in 1946. Its historical background can be traced back to 1936 as the National Union of Students split from the Student's Federation (FEV), founded that same year. Later, they united electorally (1938) with the *Partido Acción Electoral* (Electoral Action Party) to participate in the 1941 elections. The following year (1942), they merged with the *Movimiento Acción Nacionalista* (MAN) to be called *Acción Nacional* (National Action), and, finally, in 1946, they definitively became known as COPEI or the *Partido Socialcristiano* (Social Christian Party).

Similarly, the *Partido Comunista de Venezuela* (Venezuelan Communist Party, PCV), founded in 1931, has a long tradition. Its origin is remote in its particularities for the definitive foundation. The first contacts between prisoners, who identified with Marxist ideology and were called *La Carpa Roja* in the Castillo Libertador in Puerto Cabello, a group of students linked to the 1928 generation, the movements that emerged in the so-called *Grupo del Caribe*, *las Células de Caracas*, and the definitive entry into the Communist International group in 1935 that linked them with other Marxist-Leninist parties internationally, gave them significance in the partisan spectrum in Venezuela.

The last significant political party in Venezuelan history after 1936 was *Unión Republicana Democrática* (URD), founded in 1945 by various personalities from other organizations such as PDN and *Partido Democrático Venezolano* (Venezuelan Democratic Party, PDV). The latter was founded by President Isaías Medina Angarita (1897-1953), who replaced General López Contreras in the National Executive for a new period (1941-1946), but was overthrown in 1945 in the so-called October Revolution of 1945 and the Revolutionary Government Junta made it illegal.

President Rómulo Gallegos was the first president to be elected by direct, secret, and universal vote as established by the 1947 constitution, which was a product of the National Constituent Assembly of Venezuela (1946-1947) that originated the first essentially democratic constitution. Until he was overthrown in November 1948, there was no important transformation in the subsystem of political parties in Venezuela until after January 23, 1958, with the definitive advent of the democratic regime in the Venezuelan political system and its political and legal definition with the National Constitution of 1961. But, yes, this is what we could call the reconfiguration of citizen and institutional power in Venezuela.

This brief and very transitory account clearly defines the main actors in the formalization of political parties in Venezuela and their transcendental significance. Firstly, most protagonists come from unions and student organizations, while few come from the business or intellectual world. Secondly, they are personalities formed in ideopolitical criticism or opposition to Gómez's military dictatorship, yet, after the general's death and following the initial opening of the Government of General López Contreras, even throughout the first years of the administration of General Medina Angarita, the socio-political scenario, the new

democratic vision of the country and sympathies were enriched, which translated into the incorporation of political parties as fundamental channels for the citizens' new aspirations and social needs. Thirdly, the sympathies and adhesions are defined, many of them in the new party organizations according to each party's ideas, values, or beliefs in the political environment, although very precariously in the political spectrum of the time. Still, the electoral processes of 1946, 1947, and 1948 defined political parties' ideological and functional formalities. This is how they gradually won more sympathizers and militants, establishing themselves by 1958-1959 as true political participation and organization instruments and a new reconfiguration of citizen and institutional power.

The history of political parties as fundamental actors of the democratic regime and the Venezuelan political system acquires true relevance in the political development of citizenship and militancy. But its organic decomposition is also triggered through segmentations and fractures that conspire against the development and strengthening of the democratic regime. We cannot ignore the coup attempts after January 23, 1958, and until 1992 that affected the free deployment of the new parties and the disposition of power in Venezuela, among other things, that of its enemies, who have not entirely disappeared from the national stage.

My perspective is situated in the new -and not so new- political parties and their resignification on the national stage: their development and evolution as the primary guarantors of democracy, the institutional balance of the SPV, the strengthening of the Nation as a sovereign people, the Rule of Law and its legal system, citizens' rights and duties, and relational intermediation with social elites, leaders and people who, from all angles of

cultural, social, and economic activities, make up the instruments of every democratic regime.

The segmentation of political parties affects the tools that guarantee an adequate evolution of society and its institutions. Fragmented opinion or organization is inexorably reflected in the social group. Thus, I deal with political parties' division as a possible and probable cause of the Venezuelan democratic regime's deficiencies and insufficiencies. And although it may seem a paradox, since pluralism is a socio-political value of any democratic regime, it does not seem evident that this multiplicity of organizations develops or strengthens democracy. On the contrary, their political purposes and goals decrease, and citizen detachment from them increases.

Electoral systems can reduce these tensions in the division of parties, for instance, through the double electoral round, but this needs to be demonstrated. The multiplicity of political-partisan organizations that can form governments with important and disparate government coalitions, both presidential and parliamentary, as are usually formed in double-round electoral systems, have yet to demonstrate more legitimacy in their performance in public management than others.

The first divisions dating back to 1959 occurred within AD when an important group of its youth sector, due to the ideological motivation of its main actors and inspired by the triumph of the Cuban revolution in January 1959, declared themselves in rebellion against the party and Rómulo Betancourt's government (1959-1964), starting a period of armed civic-military insurgency and attempted coups together with the Communist Party of Venezuela with whom they founded a coalition of subversives called the *Fuerzas Armadas para la Liberación Nacional* (FALN). However,

the *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionario* (The Movement of the Revolutionary Left, MIR), as a political party, was founded as such in 1967. In 1962, another group of leaders broke away from AD, formalizing a new party called *Fuerza Democrática Popular* (Democratic Popular Force, FDP) and, in 1962, another group of AD leaders, called ARS at first and then *AD-Oposición*, withdrew from AD and founded the *Partido Revolucionario de Integración Nacionalista* (Revolutionary Party of Nationalist Integration, PRIN) in 1963. In 1968, there was a new division in AD with the creation of the *Movimiento Electoral del Pueblo* (People's Electoral Movement, MEP) party. Factions and divisions did not cease in the coming decade. In 1997, AD leaders and independent technocrats founded a new organization called *Apertura a la Participación Nacional* (Opening for National Participation, APN). Later, this organization merged with *Un Nuevo Tiempo* (A New Time, UNT), a party of regional origin founded in 1999. Its leaders were former *adecos* (militants from AD) and, later, as a national party in 2006, leaders and militants of the *Polo Democrático* (Democratic Pole, 2005) were incorporated, where *Solidaridad*, *Vamos*, and the social democratic group parties united. *Polo Democrático* was also nourished by other parties such as *Alianza Bravo Pueblo* (Bravo Pueblo Alliance, ABP) (2000), *Podemos* (2002), and a split from the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (Movement Toward Socialism, MAS) (1971) together with *La Causa Radical* (The Radical Cause, LCR) (1971). These last two came from an important PCV division. Later, MAS merged with MIR, and *Patria Para Todos* (Homeland for all, PPT) (1997) split from LCR. All these movements are social democratic. Some were of Marxist inspiration, at least in its programmatic beginnings, and others were inspired by Merxist revisionism in the 60s and 70s to the present day. With these mergers and detachments, some leaders retired to private life and unsubscribed from their activism.

The undergoing of the PCV has been reviewed. Its permanent divisiveness has persisted since its foundation, just like AD's, even today. Another political party with ideological and electoral relevance that saw few, yet significant ruptures was COPEI. In 1993, it had its most important division, and the party *Convergencia* was born, founded by one of its main founders and in coalition with other minority political parties that formed what became known as the *Chiripero* (electoral integration of various minority parties) and some contrary to the traditional social Christian ideology of COPEI. The division was fundamentally electoral, with a strong dispute over the presidential candidate for the 1994-1999 presidential term. In 1998, *Proyecto Venezuela*, of regional origin, was founded with antecedents in another party called *Proyecto Carabobo* (1995), also a split from COPEI. In 2000, a new division mainly for the youth sector was born in the party with the creation of *Primero Justicia* (PJ). In 2011, *Voluntad Popular* (VP) was founded. Its main leaders were also closely linked and were part of PJ, although VP defined itself as a social democrat at its definitive foundation.

Multipartidism in Venezuela and its party system is inclined and established paradoxically. While the main postulates of democracy are developed, the parties multiply due to internal disagreements where personal differences stand out, fundamentally, around internal leadership or organizational control and not so much because of ideological discrepancies. Some of these divisions are indeed the product of significant political discontent among their leaders, as was observed in debates, including some public ones where it was evident that conflict was seasoned by leadership struggles with effects on the party's internal and electoral processes.

On the other hand, these fractions gave rise to the party system disintegrating in public opinion as sociopolitical intermediaries of the national collective's aspirations and needs. Even in the different formations of civil society and institutionalized organizations such as unions, syndicates, student movements, and civil and business associations, the conflict became increasingly irritating for society, and another form of disagreement with the parties began to manifest itself. Its most immediate effect was dispensing them for their claims and vindictive activities, acquiring a new dimension as social mediators.

Subsequently, the so-called pressure and/or interest groups appear in the national environment, which produces anti-political movements with strong intentions of undermining political parties as intermediaries between the incumbent governments and society, violating relations between state institutions and society.

Without the slightest doubt, this significantly affected not only the party system itself but also the political system and the consolidation of democracy, producing a kind of sociocultural entropy, losing an essential part of the political system's homogeneity and very little reversibility. Thus, Venezuela returns to its previous party-system conditions; that is to say: Multipartidism is here to stay, and Venezuelans must deal with that.

This may be one of the excesses among the current leadership of the Venezuelan political parties. As has been said on several occasions by self-confident personalities who venture through the media and social networks, the rescue of the democratic values essayed in the recent past, and the re-establishment of the democratic political system is imminent, as was achieved with the

rules of the political game that acceptably configured power and allowed the 1961 Constitution to endure, as a product of pacts and agreements, for more than thirty years, the longest-lived of all the constitutions we have had as a Republic.

The 1999 constitution does not deny the democratic regime in its legal, administrative, or political form, yet it does so expressly against political parties. It intends to ignore them and produce a break with the predominant party system and expand the participatory and leading powers of the citizenry through “organizations with political purposes”. This resulted from several public and private interventions of groups and people against the political parties and was yet another manifestation of social rejection.

Even so, as of 2007, more than 100 political parties are registered in the National Electoral Council, which were forced to re-settle or legalize themselves due to their low electoral participation, which some achieved (i.e., AD, COPEI, PCV, and twenty others) while others did not. This is how a subsystem of multiple parties has been formed in the national shadow with little harmony and roots among citizens, voters, and society, with significant disagreements, strong personalism, ideological, programmatic, or dogmatic deficiencies, altered ideals, and substantial inconsistencies with the current political reality of Venezuela.

It is true that the government party, *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* (United Socialist Party of Venezuela, PSUV), founded in 2008, is a product of a merger with *Movimiento Quinta República* (Fifth Republic Movement), established in 1997, and other minority parties (more than twenty) dissolved or merged with PSUV. However, PSUV is not yet the hegemonic party it aspires

to be. On the contrary, it suffers from the usual wear and tear of all government parties, such as the disincorporation of previously affiliated organizations –which have also suffered to an equal or greater extent, the withdrawal of important political leaders, militants, and sympathizers, as well as the decline in support in the elections. In other words, its history has not been different from that of traditional AD and COPEI. It has been a ruling party with average influence on State officials, on important actors in the military sector or fractions of the military sphere, and on one or another social organization. Another thing is to consider its electoral effects, which are the result of exclusive conditions of the last processes and, particularly, the legislative ones of 2015 and the presidential ones of 2018, which had unfavorable results in the former and deeply controversial ones in the latter due to the poignant abstention of the main political parties in participating and recognizing results.

In summary, today, the Venezuelan political system has been established with a subsystem of multiparty, multi-electoral parties with weak ties to citizenship. The demand for unity is constant in parties of the democratic opposition and those that still support the regime. Unity is the aspiration of many, but political egocentrism, electoral personalism, and organic manifestations saturated with ideopolitical incoherence express the opposite within and between parties.

Agreements, pacts, or cohesion that draw a different purpose or panorama in the political environment seem to be very far away. Past experiences have yet to serve to reflect on the possible results for better development of the political system. The persistent demand for freedom that contributes to a quality democracy backed by autonomous institutions is unforeseen in the immediate future for Venezuela.

From the current predominant multiparty system in the country, in addition to the purpose of unity in diversity, consistency in the approaches that have been carried out to achieve a coherent political leadership of all can be envisioned or rescued to either get out of the ruling party and its circumstantial allies or significantly affect them by reducing their ability to lead the most important State institutions, starting with the National Executive. Expectations of foreign interventions, *coup d'état*, or social insurgency have been left aside.

Recent political organizations have appeared on the political spectrum, which might enable unitary elections that favor a different perspective. But it is also very likely that the ruling party will continue to act as it has until now, harming unitary attempts with its dark actions. Recent history has also taught them, consequently, to keep watch on the unscrupulous wishes of the ruling party.

In 2022 there were approximately 53 parties, including some of the traditional ones such as COPEI, AD, PCV and its ramifications, PJ, VP, UNT, ABP, MAS, LCR, PPT, and more recent ones such as *Vente Venezuela* (VV) (2012) and another of a Liberal-Republican orientation whose leaders have played a role in a radical confrontation with the incumbent party, *Avanzada Progresista* (Progressive Advance, AP). Founded in 2012 with a progressive orientation, its main leaders are Eduardo Semtei and Political Scientist Luis Augusto Romero, and its main founder and spokeswoman is Engineer María Corina Machado Parisca, who has had an important participation in the National scene. Another recent political and organizational movement is *Alianza Lápiz* (2017), which has a center-liberal orientation, and its main leader is lawyer Antonio Ecarri Angola with considerable political and electoral participation. In 2018, *Esperanza por el Cambio* (Hope

for Change) was founded as a political party, with a Christian Democratic orientation. Its main leader is evangelical Pastor Javier Alejandro Bertucci Carrero, with an electoral display in the 2018 presidential elections and recurring theopolitical propaganda. *Encuentro Ciudadano* (Citizens Encounter, EC) (2018), of a center-liberal character, has also shown strong opposition, as declared by its main founder and privileged spokesperson, lawyer Delsa Solorzano. The political movement of metropolitan mayors that became the most recent political party is *Fuerza Vecinal* (Community Strength, FV) (2021) with a centrist orientation, and its current president, lawyer Gustavo Adolfo Duque Sáez, is among its main representatives.

There have been numerous divisions within political parties, but also mergers and electoral agreements whose results are instructive for their historical development and political purposes. However, the trend is not unequivocal regarding the end that they should aspire to as representatives or social mediators between citizens and government institutions. As in almost all Western societies, ideological divergence becomes divisions that, in many cases, are goaded by political personalism and encouraged by the egocentrism of some of its leaders. Nothing is surprising in the entire cultural and organizational framework that seeks to interpret the general will of any society and represent citizens in their needs and pressures.

Renewed intentions and purposes can be observed in the immediate political and electoral landscape. Unity is not an end but an instrument to reconfigure political power in Venezuela and favor the everlasting freedom of humanity and citizens against barbarism and its representatives, as well as the quality of the Democracy as a political regime and the development of the

political system and its institutions. This is a historical design for its future as a Nation.

The new directions are yet to come. They are envisioned, though not without obscure stumblings and setbacks. The paths will have to be overcome. There is not the slightest doubt. But political and institutional responsibility, including parties, will inevitably be imposed by imminent reasonableness or by the simple common sense of history: "freedom of judgment cannot be suppressed from the human condition". The redefinition and prominence given by the novice partisan political movements and their leaders to the reasoning and environment of political power now nurtured in conjunction with the most traditional and experienced allow us to foresee unprecedented effects on the Venezuelan political event.