

Political Parties' Role and Fight for Democracy in Authoritarian Regimes: The Case of Acción Democrática in the Venezuelan political system

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The struggle of political parties in authoritarianism is complex and can vary according to the political and social context of each nation. Generally, the main objective of political parties in authoritarian regimes is to achieve national democratization, defend human rights and civil liberties, and repurpose participation, with parties as mediators or links between society and the State, through representation and consensus.

Political parties in authoritarianism face many obstacles and challenges in their fight for democracy. In many cases, regimes may try to repress or co-opt political parties, limiting their ability to organize and mobilize the population. This includes judicialization of the parties' internal processes, media censorship, persecution, detention, torture, and murder of leaders, prohibition of public financing and retaliation against private donors, prohibition of registration of new dissident parties, disqualification of candidates, co-optation of political leaders, violent and/or judicial attacks on headquarters, intimidation of supporters

through the control of points near voting centers, the community leadership of the party/regime (the *jefes de calle* have sectorized every corner of the territory), and even though the armed threat of organized crime¹. This is not a general systematization of how authoritarianism limits the actions of political parties, which could well be found in academic theorizing. Yet, Venezuelan political parties have been targets of these aggressions and limitations in the past 20 years.

Despite these obstacles, political parties can continue fighting for the country's democratization and the defense of human rights and civil liberties designing context-appropriate strategies that lead to a transition towards democracy. To do this, they must provide answers to problems and move past complaints, they must have the capacity to anticipate, articulate, and strategically coordinate internally, with other parties and with the citizenry. They must also innovate so people can regain their trust in politics.

However, the last two decades of Venezuelan political history have shown that it is not easy, specifically to achieve unity. In the past, it also cost those who fought against the dictatorships of Juan Vicente Gómez and Marcos Pérez Jiménez. And I am not referring to a homogeneous whole, where there is no discernment and the identity, ideology, and political culture of each organization are blurred, but rather the existence of a minimum of understanding that guarantees system functioning, avoiding conflicts and personalized confrontations. As the famous Punto

1 In Venezuela, more than 9 witnesses have given testimony of the threats made by *El Conejo's* gang in Las Tejerías, Aragua State, for the electoral process of November 2021, where they convened local leaders to a community meeting. When the citizens arrived at the scheduled site, gang members, while holding heavy weaponry, informed that the incumbent mayor, from the government party, had to win again.

Fijo Pact established well, a unity that recognizes, beyond the differences between the different parties, the more relevant common interests that all must defend and which are expressed in a common and minimum government program that does not exclude the right of political organizations to defend other issues not included in it².

And precisely because of how unity can weaken authoritarian regimes and enable transitions to democracy, is that the dominant coalition strategically focuses on generating division, mistrust, and diminishing the opposition. This has not only affected the relations between parties that oppose the regime, but has added to the disconnection and distrust of citizens with political parties.

Although Venezuelan parties have been created at the vanguard of struggle and as a means of political participation, the distance between parties and the population has caused the latter to feel more identified with social movements, which is not new, but that appear on the political level as an expression of values, as guides, in claiming a specific struggle or as generators of structural changes in society. And if the power of this situation is understood, progress could be made in the breakdown of the regime.

Social movements are not only oriented toward changing policies or replacing certain elites, but towards broader transformations that affect social priorities and the basic mechanisms through which society operates³. Although they have traditionally been identified merely due to their ideological scope,

2 Translated from Juan Carlos Rey, *Problemas Sociopolíticos de América Latina* (Venezuela: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1998), 246.

3 Donatella Della Porta & Mario Diani, *Los Movimientos Sociales* (Spain: Editorial Complutense, 2011), 98.

when they can effect structural changes, people join movements not just for a cause, but to contribute to collective action. Alternative movements (e.g. feminism, Christianity, environmental, or union movements) have existed and continue to exist to directly impact some type of struggle or another. Thus, there is a certain tendency of social movements to represent the interests of civil society in alternative ways.

Now, what about political parties as an instrument of participation, as a channel and guide of claims? This question does not seek to generate a dichotomy between political parties and social movements, but rather, emphasize the need to articulate the work to achieve collective action that leads to a transition to democracy. Collective action is determined by solidarity, that is, by a system of social relations that links and identifies those who participate in it, as well as by the presence of conflict. Collective action is the set of conflicting behaviors within a social system⁴. One of the conditions for collective action between political parties and the population, conflict, already exists in Venezuela, which generates a powerful and solid political and social movement. We are still to work on the solidarity and relationship between them, to break the rules of the game imposed by authoritarianism, and to be able to transform the relations of force in the political system.

Political parties today must seek to connect with citizens to push democracy forward. Parties must cease to function as if they were in a democratic system. Therefore, it is necessary to have a partisan structure in harmony with the abnormal situations to which authoritarianism submits them, strengthen

4 As defined by Alberto Melucci in "Las Teorías de los Movimientos Sociales," *Estudios Políticos* 5, no. 2 (1986), <https://doi.org/10.22201/fcpys.24484903e.1986.2.60047>. (Consulted on February 20, 2023)

the grassroots organization of each party (local committee, cell, popular networks, family commands, etc.), create surveillance organizations, structuring an agile and secure militancy in the face of the regime's abuses, political and ideological training of its members, an extension of the zones of influence of the parties, articulation with the diaspora and the leadership in exile, boycott activities against the regime to prevent stability and fragmentation, and pursue a strategy that establishes a sense of urgency, builds a coalition for change, develops a vision, communicates the vision for change, sparks widespread action, creates short-term wins, consolidates gains, and produces more changes. To achieve all this, each pro-democracy party should identify its role in the current Venezuelan political system. In this sense, the next half of this paper will focus on *Acción Democrática* (Democratic Action, AD). AD has been transcendental in national politics and can continue to play a key role after its vast 81-year experience participating in Venezuelan and international political processes.

AD's place in the Venezuelan political system is a topic of great importance in our national history. It was one of the most relevant political parties in the country during much of the 20th century and has been a key player in State democratization. To understand their role, we must look back to its inception, when it was doctrinally defined as a revolutionary and multi-class party, underscoring the latter as a priority since a large part of its development and evolution is attributed to the participation of the masses, of its political culture, of the treatment among its peers, and it continues to be a fundamental value despite the transformations it has undergone in almost a century.

Polyclassism might also represent the party's strategy today. Through class diversity, AD is founded not as the party of a

single social class, which would prevent any solutions to our problems, but as the party representing the feelings of the workers, farmers, students, professionals, merchants, and producers. As such, it became a party uniting the national sentiment, which built a realistic program that interpreted the needs of the people throughout the national territory and looked after everyone and not just the elites and the development of their capital, as had been happening in dictatorial regimes.

That vision was reflected in its policies, starting with the promotion of universal, direct, and secret voting, the massification of education through the construction of elementary and high schools, later the creation of the Gran Mariscal de Ayacucho Scholarships, which allowed young people from any sector of the country to study in the most prestigious universities in the world, among other policies. Objectively, one must also address their internal and public management crises. One of them was precisely that distance the political leadership had with the current Venezuelan reality, that which at its foundation had been a bastion.

Even with its mistakes and successes, AD has been very important throughout history and has played a key role in establishing democracy in Venezuela. Despite the challenges it has faced in recent years, AD remains a major political force in the country. At present, their call within the political system is, firstly, to recover the national feeling from the most remote places of our country, to be the channel of demands that are not found on social media, to once again be the people's trusted organization, one which represents their true interests. And that this plan has a logical and coherent sense for the recovery of the nation. If it is possible to connect again with those unsatisfied demands, with an honest speech, AD will become an energy catalyst for

Venezuelans to overcome the difficulties that they will face in that reconquest of democracy.

They mustn't forget the polyclassism on which it was founded, and work to understand and channel the new global demands, which today, despite the complex national humanitarian emergency, move the sentiments of the new generations and are demands that go hand in hand with social democracy. It must, therefore, update its programmatic thesis, and adapt it to a society where more and new forms of inequality are experienced. And, as in its beginnings, it was everyone's party. Today, it must include women, the LGBTIQ+ community, indigenous people, entrepreneurs, workers, professionals, technicians, freelancers, and people from all social sectors.

AD's experience should function as the basis for a transparent route, aiming to rebirth Venezuela instead of the deification of an individual. Moreover, it should understand the challenge of answering to the most immediate needs of the population, which are many. At the same time, it strengthens democratic institutions to avoid future authoritarian rules, corruption, and Human Rights crimes, so Venezuelans may stop dreaming of superheroes with magical solutions.

In this sense, an inclusive coalition must be proposed to fight against the regime, and once the democratic forces have power, they must organize a diverse and representative government, moralize the public administration and purify it of corruption to work on economic development and the improvement of living conditions. Without the rule of law, there can be no democracy, so first, there must be a restitution of guarantees.

This is not a matter of excessive optimism with the prognosis of our country. Yet, just as countries can inexorably deteriorate, progress in rights and democracy is also possible, and I'd rather bet on the latter. Neither is this the matter of AD's divine call to the nation's transformation. It is not the only wise political party capable of solving Venezuela's problems. However, it does have valuable experience in recovering the country from neglect.

Some affirm that this country is lost, but an excerpt from the speech given by Rómulo Betancourt on September 13, 1941, is still valid: "We, the men and women of *Acción Democrática*, an affirmative party and with faith in the reservations of nationality, say that Venezuela is not lost. It can be saved, it must be saved, and it will be saved"⁵.

5 Rómulo Betancourt's phrase was translated paraphrased to add: "and women".