

# The promise of the democratic project: fertile soil for freedom and social justice

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## **Turning a model that does not serve the majority into politics as a common good**

Two phenomena have been persistent in the political model installed in Venezuela for more than two decades: the illiberal character and patrimonialism in the exercise of public power. The opacity in the exercise of government, the disrespect for human dignity and fundamental rights, the inefficiency of the state apparatus in the management of public affairs, and the breach of fundamental obligations of the State are epiphenomena of the first and consequences of arbitrary usufruct power. This way of exercising public power is contrary to the principles of democracy, a political project anchored in the recognition, respect, and guarantee of human rights. Therefore, it is a way of exercising power that cannot serve the majority.

If the democratic project is, in essence, a rights project, we can say that the Venezuelan crisis is a political and rights crisis in all its dimensions.

The demise of liberal democracy in Venezuela has occurred hand in hand with electoral procedures<sup>1</sup>, at least in a formal dimension, and what some have called the non-republic<sup>2</sup>, characterized by the corruption of public discourse, the government of men instead of the law, power turned into an end and not a means, which adequately represents the state of things and accounts for the complexity of what our society faces.

If it wishes to redirect its course, Venezuelan social democracy must review its practical relationship with its two main sources: political liberalism, from which it draws its inescapable commitment to freedom in a broad sense, and the rejection of any form of arbitrariness, nemesis of the basic idea of the Rule of Law; and democratic socialism, from which it learns its unwavering fight against inequality and the effects that this may have on effective access to fundamental rights. This revision implies continuing the democratic project's evolution, which had two moments, political and social, where the former is the inexcusable assumption to achieve the latter, and this is, in turn, the full realization of freedom and equality values proclaimed by the former<sup>3</sup>.

If social democracy has immense challenges ahead in other societies, it finds conditions that increase the common difficulties in Venezuela. To common clichés, such as the one according to which social democratic governments squander public money<sup>4</sup>,

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1 Martínez Meucci, Miguel Ángel. *Apaciguamiento: El referéndum revocatorio y la consolidación de la Revolución Bolivariana*. Caracas, Editorial Alfa, 2012.

2 Matheus, Juan Miguel. *Ganar la república civil: Reflexiones sobre la reconstrucción nacional y la crisis de la hora presente*. Caracas, La Hoja del Norte, 2014.

3 García-Pelayo, Manuel. *Las transformaciones del Estado contemporáneo*. Madrid, Alianza, 1977.

4 Paramio, Ludolfo. *La socialdemocracia*. Madrid, Libros de la Catarata, 2009.

the Venezuelan case adds, to cite one no lesser example, the mistaken perception according to which social democracy is somehow related to the model that controls power in Venezuela, which poses powerful symbolic obstacles to the incorporation of narratives that gravitate to social justice as one of its axes.

Some questions are necessary before any State project is built from the social democracy in a context like ours:

- Can social democracy be helpful to the Republic in its attempt to make society and its individuals truly free subjects, given the unbalanced relationship between them and the State, as a consequence of the historical role of oil in our development model? Assuming, furthermore, that development's fruits should increase well-being for all<sup>5</sup>.
- Given the inescapable nature of the fundamental values of social democracy, freedom, equality, and solidarity, what type of institutional model would be the most appropriate to materialize these values in society?

This last point seems vital to us since it introduces the need to think deeply about the scaffolding that will support not social democracy but democracy itself, making it and politics a common good.

### **The practice of democratic virtues and the sense of politics**

Democracy needs democrats. This phrase is attributed to Friedrich Ebert, a social democrat and the first president of the

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5 Casanova, Roberto. *Libertad, emprendimiento y solidaridad: 10 lecciones sobre economía social de mercado*. Caracas, Alfa, 2015.

so-called Weimar Republic in interwar Germany. That democracy needs democrats is obvious, yet we must remember it. Being a democrat is a verb, a practice; it is to make public virtues the norm and their non-observance the exception; it is to build certainties from absolute respect for the dignity of people and the desire for a good life for all members of society.

At least in practice, the loss of validity of many of those certainties inherent to a liberal democratic system demands we consider the system's bases where all democratic political forces can meet, raise their differences, and assume the disputes that will define the course of society. We believe that it is imperative to ask ourselves about the conditions that must be created so that a democratic dynamic can occur in the country since a space for basic and legitimate agreements is essential, allowing a democratic administration of the typical conflicts of life in society.

The re-democratization of Venezuelan society thus requires a prior political reliberalization in a Rawlsian sense, a reliberalization of society as a whole. As a component of his Political Liberalism, John Rawls proposes a notion that seems necessary to establish the foundations of any modern democratic society:

"The idea of an overlapping consensus of reasonable comprehensive doctrines. In such a consensus, reasonable doctrines subscribe to the political conception, each from their viewpoint. The social unit is based on a consensus on the political conception. Stability is possible when politically active citizens affirm the consensus-forming doctrines, and when the requirements of justice do not conflict too much with the essential interests of

citizens, as formed and promoted through their social arrangements”<sup>6</sup> (Own translation).

In this sense, social democracy is nothing more than a doctrine in dispute with many others while not endangering the existence of a consensus that must be legitimate for all and, most importantly, for society. Preserving such a consensus is a challenge in itself, of course, and will depend on the capacities of political and social organizations to keep it current.

This is why the fight for the restitution of democratic institutions in Venezuela seems impossible without the active participation of society and political parties, where the latter ideally represent genuine aspirations for the well-being of the people. However, this collaborative action between society and partisan organizations seems unlikely without a profound transformation in the ethos of the parties, that is, in the character and culture of political organizations that make them worthy of the trust of as many people and as many sectors as possible. We believe that an important part of this transformation is to make empathy, creativity and inspiration, valid emotions and attitudes in political action and the functioning of partisan organizations so that they may have genuine relationships with society and, thus, leave behind the widespread and harmful idea according to which these organizations exploit people and communities. From our perspective, this variable, the transformation of political organizations’ culture, is essential to generate the necessary changes to achieve the country’s democratization. It is transversal to all partisan organizations and must be addressed with the priority it deserves. It is unavoidable to overcome the abyss between what those who make life in the parties say when they

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6 Rawls, John. *Liberalismo político*. 5a ed. México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2006.

are in spaces, for example, of formation and training, and what the political organizations do in their daily lives and facing society. As long as that abyss exists, building trust between society and parties seems unlikely. Not carrying out these transformations can lead to numbing our capacities as a society, as organizations, as parties, and as individuals.

This reliberalization, anchored in a radical return to freedom and notions of equality without which we cannot be truly free, is the expression of the need to put limits on power at the center of our anxieties, but also of our actions, the accountability mechanisms that contain arbitrariness, and the congruence between what we proclaim and what, in effect, we practice; all of us, political parties and civil society.

### **Social Democracy: Freedom and social justice so that life is good**

The democratic project of social democracy is simultaneously a rights and development project. However, since politics is not designed or implemented on ideal grounds but rather on specific material conditions, it is necessary that the discussion about the type of society and institutions that we can be built in Venezuela incorporate concrete elements of our material, institutional, and organizational reality so that our approach overcomes a static view of democracy, and recognizes the idea of conflict as an inescapable part of social reality.

The common agenda that global social democracy has been designing in recent decades addresses challenges regarding demographic transformations that undermine the classic support of the Welfare State, such as financial pressures on the entire social security system; the digitization of the economy and life with its

consequent gaps in inequality; climate change and the need to mitigate its effects, which require discussions on development models based on social and ecological justice; new identities that require new social agreements and recognition; and gender-related inequities in the field of labor or care rights. In Venezuela, the structural weaknesses of local public institutions are added to all this. The challenge of social democracy in Venezuela is not exhausted, then, to the question of access to power, which is determined by conditions that differentiate it from most cases in the hemisphere, but rather the underlying question about how to ensure that its public power serves in the future when it is administered democratically to respond effectively to the great issues of the global and domestic agendas. We are talking about the capacities that will be necessary among the civil servants of the State to be able to fulfill their part in Venezuelan society's task in terms of the country's development.

The focus on democracy that social democratic organizations have required in Venezuelan to seriously rethink the fundamental factors of an economic and public apparatus that should contribute to financing the guarantees of social rights. Any design of public policies in the social field that fails to reflect on the origin of necessary financing will be simple demagoguery, especially in a country that, since the beginning of democracy, has had such a major dependency on the tax contribution of oil origin, and a low presence of progressive taxation<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, we should look at the experiences of pioneering countries in the implementation of social intervention policies aimed at guaranteeing rights such as health, education, housing, labor rights, social security, etc.,

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7 Vera, Leonardo. *La tributación en Venezuela: desafíos con sentido de equidad*. Bogotá, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2017.

which were not developed at the time of implementation but rather leveraged their development processes on these policies<sup>8</sup>.

This point is of great importance because it intends to answer substantive and very basic questions about what can be raised in the Venezuelan scenario concerning the maintenance of a State that, on the one hand, will assume an immense social debt and, on the other, from the social democratic perspective, phenomena such as the commercialization of fundamental rights should be avoided.

To the previous questions, it is necessary to add: What can social democracy and political organizations of the same spectrum offer, for example, to the youth and women of Venezuela, the groups most profoundly and negatively affected by recent policies? How should the economic and developmental proposal of Venezuelan social democracy distinguish itself, considering the need to generate and promote wealth through innovation ecosystems, the incorporation into global value chains, diversification, etc.?

Findings such as those from a recent survey on living conditions<sup>9</sup> indicate that, although poverty indicators have decreased, the inequality gap has widened, making Venezuela one of the most unequal countries in the world. These findings become a daunting political task for any government of a social democratic nature. This edition of the ENCOVI also underscores

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8 Lessa Kerstenetzky, Celia. *El Estado de bienestar social en la edad de la razón: La reinención del Estado Social en el mundo contemporáneo*. México, D.F., Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2016.

9 Encovi 2022: "Cae la pobreza, aumenta la desigualdad y se agrava la crisis educativa", *El Ucabista*, disponible en <https://elucabista.com/2022/11/10/encovi-2022-cae-la-pobreza-aumenta-la-desigualdad-y-se-agrava-la-crisis-educativa>



the ethnic-racial condition as a factor that specifically influences how poverty is experienced in the capacities to materialize rights such as education, which verifies what many suspected and represents important challenges to public policy committed to social justice.

Furthermore, we cannot forget the urgent need that we as a society will have for the Venezuelan State to be in conditions allowing it to implement institutional reforms that guarantee justice and reparation for victims of human rights violations and, somehow, the State's compromise to non-repetition. This is also a dimension on which proposals will have to be designed, and, most likely, the positions in this regard will be diverse.

The task of Venezuelan political organizations that define themselves as social democrats transcend the mere conquest of power and the political displacement of the forces that control it today. Access to power is the 100-meter dash, while an expanded design of the social, economic, political, energy, and ecological transformations that the country needs is the marathon of efforts and long-term commitments.

Social democracy must incorporate the reading that the base communities and the periphery of our society make about it, according to which conflict is strongly marked by the absence of guarantees to their fundamental rights, mainly health and quality education, work dignity, personal security, basic services, etc. A good part of the political message must be built on this interpretation. This message must be affirmative and capable of representing the most diverse sectors of the population in a transversal manner and above ideological segmentations.

The belief that life can be good, that it can offer real opportunities for self-fulfillment, and that the State can be useful for these purposes is an idea that speaks to everyone for the simple reason that we all want our life to be good. You don't need to convince anyone. Aside from establishing this regarding rights and daily life, we must make people believe that politics and its organizations want and can do something in that direction. The scope and depth of the Venezuelan crisis have made the entire society the recipient of this message.

The recomposition of our society passes simultaneously, on the one hand, through material and concrete areas, such as the provision of services without which every day carries enormous weight, decent wages, and real opportunities to access rights such as education and health quality. At the same time, it has to do with symbolic and abstract spheres, which is not without its impact on people's lives. It is necessary in an existential way to build trust, the centrality of human dignity, and plurality as a value. Let us ensure that politics, parties, and the State are all useful to this end.