Venezuela and the Century of Democracy

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These days, it is common to hear that democracy has been an exception in our history. It is an opinion often based on an argument that, while significant and with consequences we still experience today, is not the only lens through which we can interpret the past. We are referring to the idea that *caudillismo* and *militarism* have been specters haunting us, at the very least, since the founding of the republic. This perspective is certainly valid but not irrefutable, for if we approach history through a periodization centered on power, we will certainly see the dominance of the armed sector over the civilian. However, if we look instead at society as a whole, we will find something different: a mobilized citizenry in pursuit of and fighting for its rights.

Since political independence was declared in July 1811, Venezuelans have experienced democracy in various forms–an unrelenting pursuit that has spanned over two centuries and continues to this day. The 19th century, defined by historians as the century of war, is not, in our view, a period marked exclusively by

caudillos. It also represents an effort to build a republic grounded in civility, shaped by the prevailing ideas of the time: liberalism and federalism. The 20th century, on the other hand, served as the stage for transforming that fragile republic into a democratic one, though at times it has not been fully appreciated. It is for this reason that we have decided to write these lines.

The Unquestionable Republic

Simón Bolívar's inert body had barely cooled down when differences over the new republic, founded in 1830, emerge. Páez's popularity among Venezuelans lasts for about a decade. The transition from monarchy to republic results in little more than 70 years of conflict. The monarchist mindset is not destroyed with the snap of a finger. Civil wars, caudillos, and revolutions are the variables of a Venezuela's moving toward independent political development after a costly war that lasted two decades. This is not an exceptional case, as it is common throughout the region, from Río Grande to Patagonia. It is no coincidence that historian Manuel Caballero describes this period with two words: war and liberalism.

Three surnames resonate in the string of names from that period: Páez, Monagas, and Guzmán. These are three men with the same common goal (to make Venezuela a modern liberal republic) but with different ideas (and, above all, methods) when it comes to putting them into practice. Hence, the republic wavers in its early years, but its concept does not succumb to the clashes. None of them, for example, proposed a return to the state that existed before 1811. The monarchist consciousness of Venezuelans does persist in society, as historian Germán Carrera Damas states, but it is increasingly weak and fragile, and Venezuelans make

an effort to make this clear (as Inés Quintero puts it). While the revolution abolished titles and privileges, it is up to its descendants to guarantee their rights.

The Treaty of Coche, the Decree of Guarantees, and the Decree on Public Instruction are the best evidence of this. The first brought the factions of the Federal War to the negotiating table, reaching an agreement without resorting to arms. The second guaranteed fundamental rights (some of which are still fought for worldwide) in the aftermath of the carnage of the civil war. The third established Venezuelan public schools under the premise that only educated nations could reach the pinnacle of civilization. While these ideals may seem obvious today (and, in form, even outdated), the point is that these three documents –along with many others, such as constitutions– reveal something crucial: in the 19th century, it was possible to conceive and craft a civil republic.

Far from being merely a period of devastating civil wars (more than a hundred, as counted by Manuel Caballero), the 19th century could be considered the century of republican construction. This is evidenced by political centralization and the end of *caudillismo* as a historical phenomenon, achieved through the actions of Cipriano Castro and Juan Vicente Gómez. The creation of the National Army redefined Venezuela as a modern state (at least according to Max Weber), and the reorganization of public finances under Román Cárdenas consolidated the state. Needless to say, oil played a transformative role during these years, positioning the country on the international stage with recognition of its territory, resources, and position. In this light, the Andeans can be seen as just the tip of the iceberg.

Thus, by the time Venezuela entered the 20th century, the existence of a republic was no longer subject to question. The political efforts of the 19th century seemed to have borne fruit after nearly a century of armed conflicts. Building a republican state in opposition to the monarchical order that had prevailed in the country until the early 1800s was the central goal of the governments of that century –a purpose pursued through various means, with war being the principal, though not the only, one, as evidenced by the examples previously mentioned. The same cannot be said for democracy, a concept that had been present since 1811 but now remained an unfinished task for the political endeavors of the 20th century.

Through Trials and Errors

When the first edition of the article *El gendarme necesario* appeared in 1911, authored by Laureano Vallenilla Lanz, Juan Vicente Gómez had been in power for three years. While no one questioned the existence of a republic, albeit a fragile one, democracy had become society's unfulfilled promise. And it would remain so for a long time, though this was unknowable to the Venezuelans of the time, whom the regime's propagandists sought to educate–among them, of course, is the author of *Cesarismo democrático*, a book published in 1919. On this subject, historian Tomás Straka writes: "Vallenilla Lanz's fundamental thesis is that, due to Venezuela's geographical conditions, the caudillo –that is, a Caesar elevated to power by the will of the people (…) is its natural form of government."[1]

1 Tomás Straka, "Cesarismo democrático: la victoriosa derrota Vallenilla Lanz", 4 de noviembre de 2019, en *Prodavinci,* consultado el 17 de abril de 2024. https://prodavinci.com/cesarismo-democratico-la-victoriosa-derrota-de-vallenilla-lanz/ .

The idea was not exclusive to the gomecismo. The governments that followed the dictator's death continued to rely on it, albeit with less vigor than in his time. This explains the reluctance of Eleazar López Contreras and Isaías Medina Angarita to fully extend political guarantees to society, reserving them only for the most "qualified": literate men over the age of 21. While far from what we might today consider democracy, this approach was justified in the name of civilization, as professed by the positivist educators of the 19th century and interpreted by Gómez's adherents. As historian Elías Pino Iturrieta notes, they "(...) devised the first systematic attempt at legitimizing a government in Venezuela through the application of a coherent and uniform theory."[2]

Although it continues to exist in the realm of ideas, like a ghost refusing to fade away, the notion of the democratic Caesar collapses in practice with the events of October 18, 1945, which definitively put an end to the remnants of *gomecismo*. The strongman, the "necessary gendarme," is no longer seen as the figure responsible for guiding society to the pinnacle of civilization. Instead, the new leaders believe that everyone is capable of doing so. This sentiment is captured by Rómulo Betancourt on October 30 of the same year, just 12 days after the overthrow of Medina Angarita and the formation of the Revolutionary Government Junta, which quickly calls for the election of a Constituent Assembly: "This revolution has been carried out to return sovereignty to the people."[3]

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2 Elías Pino Iturrieta, *Positivismo y gomecismo*, Caracas, Alfa, 2016, p. 76.

3 Rómulo Betancourt, "Motivos y objetivos de la Revolución de Octubre", in: Jesús Piñero, *Venezuela: documentos para su estudio (1498-1999)*, Caracas, Luis Felipe Capriles Editor, 2021, p. 217.

However, the vices they had promised to combat soon emerged in the new government and that of Rómulo Gallegos —the first president elected by popular vote. As a result, this democratic project was effectively overseen by a single political party, Acción Democrática. For the military officers involved in the events of October 18, this dominance had plunged the country into anarchy, making the presence of an institution to restore order essential. That institution, of course, was the Armed Forces, which seized power on November 24, 1948, claiming to guarantee "(...) a constitutional order appropriate to Venezuela's true reality and arising from the national will, freely and impartially expressed through political organizations,"[4] as they declared just hours after taking control.

In retrospect, examining these events from the present, we can assert that throughout the first half of the 20th century, there were at least three paths taken by the governments of the time in their pursuit of democracy: the first, under the premise of the strongman; the second, guided by a political party as the process's driving force; and the third, rooted in institutional authority stemming from the Armed Forces. All three had their chance to be implemented, and all three failed spectacularly in their attempts. It would take until the second half of the century to uncover the keys to ensuring a lasting democratic republic. The pivotal moment in that process came on October 31, 1958, with the signing of a political agreement.

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4 "Exposición de las Fuerzas Armadas Nacionales (Comunicado N° 6)", Caracas, 24 de noviembre de 1948, en: Eduardo Mayobre, *Venezuela 1948-1958. La dictadura militar,* Caracas, Fundación Rómulo Betancourt, 2013, pp. 79-80.

Consolidation... and Crisis?

The signing of the Puntofijo Pact not only represented a partisan agreement among the three most popular political groups with liberal democratic visions but also reflected a much broader consensus that spanned various sectors of the elites and society. This event signified the commitment of business leaders, workers and unions, the Church, students, and even the military to democracy. This commitment represented a significant milestone for the country, as for the first time in many years –perhaps since the Treaty of Coche in the 19th century– Venezuelans decided to come to an understanding without tearing each other apart and succeeded in doing so. While the country had not lacked attempts to resolve conflicts peacefully, this time, they triumphed.

The democratic project that began in 1958 did not, however, cease to have enemies or detractors. On the contrary, democracy allows for all voices, even those that seek to destroy it. The examples are abundant: the first decade of the agreement between the political parties was very turbulent –a period of coups attempting to destabilize the state, but ultimately ending in failure. Although these movements came from two fronts, characteristic of Cold War extremism, the antidemocratic actions do not have any political color. As historian Edgardo Mondolfi Gudat explains in his book Temporada de golpes, where he carefully examines the historiography of these uprisings: "(...) as if, in a mosaic fashion, it were possible to separate the waters between the military leaders of the various revolts."[5]

5 Edgardo Mondolfi Gudat, *Temporada de golpes*, Caracas, Alfa, p. 21.

This did not mean that democracy was immune to attacks or emerged unscathed from its problems. This is why historian Rafael Arráiz Lucca asserts that, by the end of the first 15 years of democratic experience, the problems began.[6] Not because they hadn't existed before, but because they continue to persist to this day. As the 1970s progressed, the leaders and critics of the project quickly diagnosed the symptoms, and by the early 1980s, they were already proposing solutions: democracy needed to be expanded, and decentralization was the cure for this illness. The creation of the Presidential Commission for State Reform (Copre) pointed to the discomfort, but it wasn't enough: devaluation and political corruption caused severe damage.

However, these years cannot be compared to those that would follow starting in 1989. The social eruption of February 27 and the state's response to those events contributed to the narrative of democracy's enemies. So much so that, despite appearing more stable at the start of the 1990s, two attempted coups in 1992 ultimately eroded the public's trust. Nevertheless, neither the Caracazo, nor the military uprisings, nor the conspiracies were able to undermine the republic and democracy. In the end, the president's departure was decided by him following a ruling by the Supreme Court and an investigation by Congress. The institutionalization once dreamed of at the beginning of the 20th century had already become a reality, liberal democracy had been consolidated, and it was not in crisis as had been suggested.

And who were the ones voicing these criticisms? The general public. The end of the century coincided with the end of an era.

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6 Rafael Arráiz Lucca, *La democracia en Venezuela, un proyecto inconcluso*, Caracas, Alfa, 2020 pp. 157-164

Despite the ambidextrous efforts of President Carlos Andrés Pérez's enemies,[7] a few dared to say that it was not democracy that was in crisis, but the institutions, particularly the political parties.[8] A fact that supports this idea is not only Pérez's constitutional departure in 1993, but also the election of an outsider: Hugo Chávez, the man who had attempted to seize the government by force in 1992, but who won the 1998 election without obstacles, under the democratic norms that were not hijacked by two parties, as some –Chávez included– had claimed. There were, therefore, clear electoral guarantees for the alternation of power.

Final Remarks

Having completed this chronological outline and looking back at the examples discussed, we can say that the 20th century was the century of democracy. The political projects presented during this century share the common goal of pursuing a liberal democratic regime, despite their differing concepts and practices: the caudillo, the party, and the institutionalized military. This is not even considering the expansion of rights that Venezuelan society achieved, outside of presidentialism, such as the inclusion of women, urbanization, corporate and community associations, mass education, and social inclusion.[9] All of that in just 100 years. It was far from being a lost century, as a retired lieutenant colonel once claimed.

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7 We speak of an ambidextrous effort because the president's enemies came from both the left and the right

8 Manuel Caballero, *Las crisis de la Venezuela contemporánea*, Caracas, Alfadil, 2009, pp. 181.

9 Sobre estos temas sugerimos ver: Inés Quintero (coord.). *La sociedad en el siglo XX venezolano.* Caracas, Fundación para la Cultura Urbana, 2021..