

Democratization



Year 4, Issue 20

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The nineties were particularly complex for a country that had experienced clear institutional, economic, and political progress since 1958. The consolidation of democracy as a system had opened up a panorama of multiple possibilities, all of them apparently positive. However, a succession of unfortunate events set off alarms, many of which went unheeded.

It should be noted that democracy in Venezuela and specifically the second democratic project, initiated after the overthrow of Marcos Pérez Jiménez, faced strong opposition, first by the military, then by civilians and members of the leftist parties, who, taking advantage of the Cuban revolutionary wave, outlined harsh attacks as the attempted coups of the 1960s. So that:

The second Liberal Democratic Republic did not start without opponents, or skepticism about its objectives and institutionalization; the potential risks that its implementation would have on republican life were warned. From very early

on, the fundamental criticism of the democratic system took the form of political parties¹.

Political parties, and especially Acción Democrática (AD), were harshly criticized throughout the democratic period. Already between 1945 and 1948 they had been accused of exercising power with a marked sectarianism, from 1958 the criticisms and accusations revolved around corruption and bipartisanship with the COPEI party as the second political force. However, the system seemed to take shape beyond parties and elections. Once again, the presence of oil occupied a preponderant role, making room for the frenzied desires of the rulers and the citizens. Guillermo Tell Aveledo explains that, after the early seventies, Venezuela would enter a new stage, one where society had subscribed its varied needs to the figure of the state and the messianic action of black gold: "Since the seventies, the society that without distinction of class had been stimulated to desire bonanza, had not been required to be more productive, nor more efficient, nor more autonomous"².

The farewell of the eighties would be just as dramatic as the beginning of those ten years. In 1983, the national economy would have to assimilate the concrete evidence of a crisis that appeared in its most shocking form, the currency devaluation:

At the end of the 1970s, a sustained process of economic deterioration began for Venezuelan society, which would mean a dramatic involution in the quality of life of vast sectors of the population (...) The economic recession will produce setbacks in important social achievements obtained

1 Guillermo Tell Aveledo, *La Segunda República Liberal Democrática, 1959-1998* (Caracas: Fundación Rómulo Betancourt, 2014), 34. (Own translation).

2 *Ibidem*, 35. (Own translation).

during the development of the import substitution model, creating the conditions for the discomfort of various social and political actors, who will lead the intense and confrontational mobilizations at the end of the century³.

February 21, 1983 has remained as a milestone in the memory of Venezuelans, marked with the ink of the recession. It was the confirmation of the decline of a system that required important and complex adjustments, many of them difficult to assimilate for a society that little by little had forgotten the expression “crisis”: “That date is known in Venezuela as Black Friday and it was the first warning sign about the economic crisis that would with ups and downs last well into the XXI century”⁴.

From that date and its deep implications, a succession of actions will emerge, some seeking to solve problems, others, creating new ones. Both citizens and political representatives were aware that a new reality was approaching. Let us remember the President-elect of the Republic who, in the act of being sworn in, said “...I receive a mortgaged Venezuela...”. It was not a speech that sought to overshadow the management of the previous president. Luis Herrera Campíns knew that the clouds that darkened the horizon were not temporary.

Margarita López Maya, in her book, *Del viernes negro al referendo revocatorio*, states that one of the reasons that slowed the deterioration of the country's political, economic and social system was associated with the application of measures aimed at evaluating and correcting imbalances. Therefore, that expression regarding Venezuelan rulers of the eighties and nineties who

3 Margarita López Maya, *Del viernes negro al referendo revocatorio* (Caracas: Alfadil, 2005), 21. (Own translation).

4 *Ibidem*, 23. (Own translation).

stood idly admiring the devouring fire is absolutely false, so that: “the fact that Venezuelan society has been able to overcome the severe crisis political (...) resorting to institutional mechanisms and without the breakdown of its democratic system, is due, among other factors, to the State reform process that began in 1984 with the constitution of Copre”⁵.

The Presidential Commission for the Reform of the State (COPRE), created in 1984, was made up of a large group of figures, professionals and politicians from different positions, who all had a common objective, “...to carry out a systematic and in-depth study to offer forceful proposals for the decentralization and reform of the State, and to give rise to creating greater space for citizen participation”⁶. COPRE was important, it showed that the country, and the Venezuelan democracy even more so, was not infallible in the face of deterioration, like any other system that required attention. However, the commission’s assessments were ignored, with the election for governors probably being the only suggestion that was considered and applied.

By 1988, Venezuela would witness a new electoral contest, marked by several factors, all of them associated with the structural crisis that the country was experiencing. The victorious candidate was Carlos Andrés Pérez (CAP) of Acción Democrática. There was a triumphalist aura around him, not only with regard to the votes he could obtain, but also the changes he would generate in the country. For citizens, CAP’s election could translate into a potential reverse on the effects of the crisis. The sensations were so hopeful that the swearing-in of the president took place outside

5 *Ibidem*, 115. (Own translation).

6 Elías Pino Iturrieta (Coord.) *Historia mínima de Venezuela*. Ciudad de México, El Colegio de México, 2019, p. 204. (Own translation).

the usual spaces, the Congress had been left empty and a theater room was set up to anoint the new ruler:

On February 2, 1989, the semi-hexagonal stage of nine hundred square meters of the Sala Ríos Reyna was occupied almost entirely by a replica of the Senate dais (...) Pérez was sworn in by a co-partisan, Octavio Lepage, who was the president of the Senate, and as if that were not enough, he received the command of another party colleague, Jaime Lusinchi, an old friend. The path seemed clear for the new government. The party had to be with pomp⁷.

In a little over twenty days, CAP's government would be addressing its first conflicts, this time, of a social nature. After announcing the economic measures to be taken –liberation of prices, increase in service costs, increase in gasoline and public transport up to 30%–, a group of carriers displaying the most disproportionate of excesses, would collect the increase without the consent of any body, thus unleashing collective protests on February 27, 1989.

The cellophane was torn, the honeymoon was over, and the country demanded new and efficient actions, while the popularity of the country's main political parties, especially Acción Democrática, was significantly diminishing. This situation would leave the stage set for the development of the first regional elections.

Gloria Lizárraga de Capriles and Lolita Aniyar de Castro, to the rescue of politics

With asphalt still steaming from the events that began on February 27, the government would announce a series of reforms

7 Mirtha Rivero, *La rebelión de los náufragos* (Caracas: Editorial Alfa), 32.

aimed at readjusting and reinstating the functioning of the system. These were measures already suggested by COPRE in 1984. In this way, the Congress of the Republic would indicate the approval of the following laws: Law on the Election and Removal of State Governors, Law on the Period of the Public Powers of the States, Organic Law of Decentralization, Delimitation and Transfer of Competences of the Public Power, Organic Law of Municipal Regime. All these new laws joined those already sanctioned in 1988, such as the Organic Law of the Council of the Judiciary, the objective was set not only in the model supported by decentralization, but also in the need to create trust in the citizenry.

The power to elect governors attributed to the President of the Republic was now to be at the hands of the people. The voters now had the right and the duty to elect their regional representatives. However, the novelty was not met with the excitement of voters. The people disdainfully observed the electoral rite and the future elections scheduled for the month of December looked to a large extent like a space for "punishment vote" on the ruling party.

The political scientist Luis Salamanca comments that, close to the 1989 elections and later in 1993, voters saw "...a dynamic of electoral misalignment without realignment, because voters were not attracted by any electoral offer, but took refuge in an anti-political attitude, more precisely, anti-partisan"⁸.

The discouragement he speaks of will be clearly evidenced in the results of that December 3, 1989. President Pérez had reached the chair of Miraflores obtaining victory in 19 of the 20 states. By the time of the regional elections, the Acción Democrática party

⁸ Luis Salamanca, *¿Por qué vota la gente?* (Caracas: Editorial Alfa, 2012), 139. (Own translation).

would lose 9 of the 20 possible governorships, followed by COPEI who obtained 7 governorships, while La Causa R and MAS divided the two remaining entities. Clearly, AD remained the main political force in the country, however, its defeats in states such as Anzoátegui, Miranda, Zulia, Bolívar, and Carabobo was a clear indicator that matters were not at their best.

Furthermore, there was a more forceful factor that demonstrated citizens' discomfort, their lack of interest in the electoral rite, the AD party and the state of affairs that involved that process, which was the phenomenon of abstention:

Both the opposition vote and the electoral abstention, which reached the figure of 54.85%, acted as mechanisms to vent the prevailing political discontent and social unrest, sending a clear message, although unheard then by the hegemonic actors⁹.

In the midst of that chaotic and disastrous panorama, new representations were presented in the political concert. Among these new figures we not only find the emerging parties such as the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) or La Causa R (LCR), but also important female leaders emerged. Ismenia de Villalba had already presented herself as a candidate in the 1988 elections. Although this first presentation of a woman as a presidential candidate could not be entirely brilliant, it was very clear that the electoral scenario would no longer be expressed exclusively by traditional male political figures.

Under the conditions of crisis, the experience of the 1988 elections with the presence of Ismenia de Villalba, a population upset with the latest measures and actions developed by the

⁹ Margarita López Maya. *Del viernes negro al referendo revocatorio...*, p. 119. [Own translation].

government, the electoral process of 1989 was carried out, which was the first to elect governors. Gloria Lizárraga de Capriles was elected.

Baruta did not yet exist as an independent municipality. Product of the reforms aimed at decentralization, it would obtain its autonomy in 1989 after the approval of the Organic Law of Municipal Regime. Thus, Baruta separated from the Sucre District and would start a new path, a new history. The political pages of the brand new municipality were inaugurated with the signing of its first female mayor.

Before her election, Gloria Lizárraga had already been carrying out activities and promoting changes in her community. The COPEI party saw in her the necessary qualities to win and start a social project in the municipality. The green party won a total of 101 mayorships in those elections, including Baruta.

Although we had already had female members in the Venezuelan Congress, never had a municipal or state entity been under the command of a woman as a result of direct, secret, and universal suffrage. It was without a doubt the most important triumph up to that moment for the women's movement that had emerged at the beginning of the century, when a group of women addressed a letter to President Eleazar López Contreras demanding a series of reforms. That group that would later achieve the consecration of the female vote for the presidential elections in 1947 found its reflection in Gloria's victory.

After celebrations and cheers, an action plan came in place. The team of the new mayor had to get down to work. Soon, the new appointees came to understand that things would not come easy. That old adage "*trabajar con las uñas*" would fittingly describe their struggle:

Given that the old Sucre District concentrated its powers in Petare, Lizárraga had to take on the task of building Baruta's institutions and identity from scratch, in the midst of a country that was already showing symptoms of economic crisis and political instability after El Caracazo. The leader herself said that the first headquarters of the Mayor's Office of Baruta operated on the third floor of the Plaza Las Américas shopping center, in a place with rented chairs and boxes instead of filing cabinets and desks. She relates that, due to the lack of resources, she had to call the companies located in the municipality to advance the payment of their taxes and thus be able to settle the payroll of their workers. Neither she nor her administrative officials were paid until they had stable income¹⁰.

“It was a beautiful experience; I have been very happy being the first female mayor of Baruta and of the country”¹¹, Lizárraga commented in an interview. Her social and political work had begun very young, “at 14 years of age, with the flourishing of democracy in Venezuela, Lizárraga began in the ranks of the COPEI social-christian party. There she was an active member where she advocated for the most vulnerable sectors of society, a facet that she maintained during her administration and in her humanitarian work once she was away from the political spotlight”¹².

10 Jordan. F. “El legado de Gloria Lizárraga de Capriles, la madre del municipio”, *El Diario*, March, 03, 2021. Available in: <https://eldiario.com/2021/03/31/el-legado-de-gloria-lizarraga-de-capriles-la-madre-del-municipio-baruta/> (Own translation).

11 Entrevista a Gloria Lizárraga de Capriles. Available in: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NAUb7HPCoDI&t=18s> (Own translation).“

12 Jordan. F. “El legado de Gloria Lizárraga de Capriles, la madre del municipio”, *El Diario*, March, 03, 2021. Available in: <https://eldiario.com/>

Open-air markets, organization and support for the development of different sports disciplines and the creation of the municipal police during her first year in office were part of the indelible legacy of Gloria Lizárraga. At the same time, her presence as ruler opened a window that reaffirmed (if there was still any doubt) that the mission of women as citizens had to be global, participation as voters was not enough, it was necessary to extend actions to the very act of governing. After 1992, when her period of government ended, new candidates and new support from voters would appear. Such was the case of Ivonne Attas, who became the next female mayor of the municipality.

Thus, we arrive at the year 1992, remembered by Venezuelans with sadness. Members of the Armed Forces under a nocturnal operation try to depose President Carlos Andrés Pérez, who on the day of the uprising was recently back in the country after his participation in the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. The rebels tried to control several important states of the country, including the capital city. However, as the morning progressed and with the dawn, the options of the group of plotters began to dissipate.

That morning, Venezuelans would come to know the then Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chávez Frías. His unknown effigy would soon become the vehicle to channel the different criticisms towards the Pérez government. The different opponents of the government would line up their harshest criticism and, later, even a forceful denunciation of embezzlement against the president himself would arise.

2021/03/31/el-legado-de-gloria-lizarraga-de-capriles-la-madre-del-municipio-baruta/ (Own translation).

In the midst of that convulsive climate, new regional elections were held. Those elections marked the end of Gloria Lizárraga's gubernatorial career. The municipality remained in the hands of Ángel Enrique Zambrano, and in the annals of Baruta the name of its first female mayor would be inscribed forever. That first experience of a woman elected by popular vote would soon be replicated in the state of Zulia.

The electoral environment would maintain the same acute situation. The regional elections of 1992, like those held in 1989, were preceded by convulsive events that dynamited the aspirations of the white party, but beyond that, they broke the feeling towards the institutional character represented in the popular elections. The coup attempts of 1992 had created a murky atmosphere prior to December 6 of that year, when Venezuelans had to go to the polls to elect new governors or re-elect those who had shown a more or less decent management. The results would be overwhelming on two counts, firstly, abstentionism was maintained, even though it fell by 4% (see Table A and B), on the other hand, Acción Democrática lost their position as the main electoral force in the regional sphere, losing four of the eleven governorships obtained in 1989.

Table A				
Elections 1989				
	Governors		Mayors	
	Absolute	Relative	Absolute	Relative
Valid votes	3.978.290	94,5	3.978.803	95,9
Invalid votes	220.346	5,5	166.703	4,1
Counted votes	4.198.636	100,0	4.145.506	100,0
Abstention	5.0007.486	54,9	5.007.486	54,9
Voting population	9.205.849	100,0	9.205.849	100,0

Teble B				
Elections 1989				
	Governors		Mayors	
	Absolute	Relative	Absolute	Relative
Valid votes	4.635.607	95,8	4.471.988	91,8
Invalid votes	202.473	4,2	396.662	8,2
Counted votes	4.838.080	100,0	4.868.650	100,0
Abstention	4.979.439	50,7	4.979.439	50,7
Voting population	9.817.519	100,0	9.817.519	100,0

Source: Statistics Directorate of the Supreme Electoral Council and the National Electoral Council.

For its part, COPEI's rebound in the regional elections, the re-election of Oswaldo Álvarez Paz in Zulia, and the attempted coups of 1992 generated a climate that offered an apparent opportunity for the Zulian leader in the presidential elections of 1993. Álvarez Paz would become the candidate of the green awning, for which he had to leave his post as state governor.

On December 5, 1993, general elections were held, where Zulians, in addition to voting for a new president, also had to choose their new governor. With 40.74% of the valid votes, and the support of parties such as MAS, Convergencia and URD, Lolita Aniyar de Castro won and became the first governor elected by popular vote.

The new government would concentrate its efforts on trying to build a social project. Aniyar de Castro considered that the foundations of good management lay in offering opportunities for growth and development to the most needy sectors. She had come to power with the support of many identified leftist parties, such as: PCV, Liga Socialista, Bandera Roja, Movimiento Electoral del Pueblo, and La Causa Radical, however, beyond imposing an

ideological discourse, her mission was mainly to work for the state development.

Lolita Aniyar de Castro came to the governorship at fifty-six years of age, had significant training in the world of Criminal Law and criminology, for many years she had been part of the faculty of the University of Zulia, she knew the strengths and the weaknesses of an entity that was now under her direction. Politics and state responsibilities were not alien to her either. She had previously represented Zulia in the Legislative Assembly and in the National Congress of Venezuela.

During her administration, the VI Regional Development Plan was designed, and the main emphasis was on reducing poverty, focusing on opportunities for the most needy sectors. It was a regional project with a “deeply social accent, privileging social justice, respect for the rights of people, direct contact with the vulnerable and a special affection and recognition for the marginalized (children, women, the elderly and indigenous)”¹³. One of the most outstanding aspects in the actions of the new governor was represented in the capacity of citizen consultation. In this sense, she used various tools such as the Regional Development Agency and the Human Solidarity Committee to probe the realities of the communities.

Aniyar de Castro wanted to strengthen the cultural aspect, which would allow an assimilation of the values of justice and equity: “The Ministry of Culture promoted the Local Government Power Councils, a figure created for the organization of various cultural manifestations of the communities, however, the

13 Jennifer Fuenmayor; Haydée Ochoa Henríquez. “Descentralización y modernización administrativa de las gobernaciones en Venezuela: el caso del estado Zulia”, *Revista Venezolana de Economía y Ciencias Sociales*, vol. 9, N. 1, January-April, 2003, pp. 195-196. (Own translation).

fundamental purpose was to organize people in any manifestation of life at the community level. From the Government Secretariat, work was done on the formation of the Citizen Security Committee as a form of active participation of the neighbors in the constitution of crime prevention mechanisms¹⁴. Her extensive experience in Criminal Law allowed her to focus her management on crime prevention, reduce crime channels, and bet on a more efficient judicial system.

In this sense, for Lolita Aniyar, the “development of human capital as the origin and destination of government action, and with it the confrontation and eradication of poverty”¹⁵ was of vital importance. The country that Venezuelans experienced during that period 1993-1995 was radically different from today’s country, however, there were important and structural problems that required immediate action, for instance, the high cost of the basic basket, assistance services and the educational plan, goals that Aniyar wanted to achieve, but the national context prevented her from doing so.

Clearly, good intentions are not enough, managing a regional entity as complex and important as the State of Zulia requires the understanding of a series of notable variables. In this sense, the government of Lolita Aniyar:

... attempted to tackle the institutional fragmentation of social policy, and although she did not develop a totally coherent policy in the area of social economy, she did place it as a priority area, in accordance with the central government's statements and guidelines in its IX Plan de la Nación.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 196. (Own translation).

¹⁵ Lolita Aniyar de Castro. *El Zulia que Queremos, El Zulia que Podemos Alcanzar*. Programa de Gobierno 1993-1996. Maracaibo, Venezuela, p. 30. (Own translation).

However, the support policy for the sector lacks a coordinated institutional base in this short period, despite the creation of the Office for the Coordination of Social Policies and the effort that ORDEC made to organize the participation of the communities. In general, the lack of systematic information for decision-making and the diversity of ideological positions were the basic elements for not achieving a more coherent and effective support policy for the social economy during this period. In addition to the persistence of a social policy with a welfare tendency¹⁶.

Regardless, she also made an effort in the complex field of housing. She did not promise to solve that costly problem, however, she offered benefits to promote the acquisition of necessary materials for construction through the Human Solidarity Committee and the Institute of Social Development. Of course, the self-construction of houses did not solve the existing housing problems and in some cases could aggravate them due to the lack of urban planning in the communities.

With regard to privatization, a controversial issue during the early 1990s, the government of Aniyar de Castro went the other way. She tried to ensure that the port, the airport, and the Rafael Urdaneta bridge were managed in the best way, avoiding acts that could jeopardize the proper functioning of these three posts of economic income: “after carrying out an evaluation that reveals corruption, non-compliance of contracts by private companies, lack of maintenance, operational problems and provision of an

16 Gabriela Moran Leal, Emis Cavadias Gómez y Carlos Eduardo López, “Las organizaciones de la economía social en la Reforma del Estado en Venezuela: Caso del Estado Zulia 1989-2000”, *Tendencias* Revista de la Facultad de Ciencias Económicas y Administrativas, III, no.1 (Universidad de Nariño, Julio de 2002): 159. (Own translation).

inefficient service”¹⁷ the government decided to gradually reverse the privatization that had already begun at a state level.

Lolita Aniyar thought that it was possible to establish a social project in the state of Zulia and decided to stand for re-election in 1995. She was convinced that things were going in the right direction and it was necessary to continue. However, the country had taken another course. The 1992 coup attempt, the corruption case in which the President of the Republic was implicated, the discrediting of political parties, and a latent desire that cried out for immediate results, brought about the consequences that military outsiders began to see themselves as potential candidates to run the country. Francisco Arias Cárdenas would win those elections and at the end of his mandate he would be re-elected. The country entered by yet another new route and an uncertain horizon awaited.

17 Jennifer Fuenmayor; Haydée Ochoa Henríquez. *Descentralización y modernización administrativa de las gobernaciones en Venezuela: el caso del estado Zulia...*, p. 197. (Own translation).