Between Fear and Freedom: Voting before Democracy

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A Jaime Ybarra (1970-2022), *in memoriam*.

A long tradition

On June 30, 1937, an unprecedented event occurred: the opposition emerged victorious in an election. From what we now recognize as democracy, the elections were never free from challenges, to say the least:the principal opposition leaders had been expelled from the country in March, a significant portion of the population was disqualified from voting, a third-grade system introduced numerous checks and balances in the voting process and the presidential election, and above all the opposition faced the discouraging precedent set by the January partial elections, where the Federal Court and Cassation systematically annulled the victories of opposition candidates. However, considering that this transpired only a year and a half after the demise of Juan Vicente Gómez, the mere existence of opposition candidates, including leftist ones, and the fact that the voting process was sufficiently clean for them to secure victories in no less than fourteen of the twenty parishes in Caracas at that time, signals a revolutionary shift led by Eleazar López Contreras. Although the first universal, direct, and secret elections were still a decade away –October 27, 1946– this pivotal step laid the foundation for subsequent democratic developments. Without the municipal elections of June 30, 1937, the seventy-year autocracy that began in

1870 would not have concluded. This is undeniably a significant milestone.

Yet, as in any historical process, it had as many continuities as ruptures. It is not inconsequential that these changes were executed within the framework of existing legislation enacted during the concluding phase of the prolonged autocratic period. Lopez Contreras' initial reforms addressed the electoral issue, albeit through reform rather than innovation. This prompts the question of why a regime like Gómez's would be concerned with legislating elections. Were there ever elections, even at the municipal level, during his extended dictatorship? The answer is affirmative–even during the Gómez era, people participated in elections. As elucidated in the subsequent pages, voting never stopped in the Venezuelan political landscape, even during its most authoritarian phases. None of the Venezuelans who voted in 1937 were old enough to have engaged in the last somewhat free elections in 1892. If they possessed any recollection of campaigns and elections, it likely traced back to José Manuel "El Mocho" Hernández and the electoral fraud of 1898, sparking a series of civil wars, from which Juan Vicente emerged as the "Father of Peace" after the battle of Ciudad Bolívar in 1903 (although the frank and pure dictatorship had already been instituted by its then head, Cipriano Castro, who, among other things, was in charge of dismantling direct elections–but we will return to that later). The political misfortune of "El Mocho" should have served as a cautionary tale against elections. Nearly everyone had a *mochista* father or grandfather whose health they toasted when sipping watercress or lemon verbena bitters. However, by 1937, this was nothing more than a nostalgic, melancholic, and picturesque sentiment. Those who went to the polls likely did so with a blend of fear of a return to 1898 or a situation that had recently led to civil war in Spain while simultaneously harboring hope for the

freedom that appeared to be finally emerging. It mirrors the dilemma later observed by Germán Arciniegas as the fate of Latin America dominated by dictatorships[1] but was already unfolding in Venezuela then. An additional revelation emerged: voting was worthwhile. Despite all the impediments, voting played a crucial role in effecting change in the long run.

The commendation of the 1937 elections is noteworthy. Could a similar commendation be extended to the electoral processes during the Guzmancista and Gomecista autocracies? Were these elections merely instances of fiascos akin to those of 1898 or 1846? It is plausible to consider that these electoral exercises primarily served as symbolic gestures towards the established order, mechanisms designed to legitimize pre-existing situations, exerting minimal to negligible influence on power distribution. Nonetheless, the recently deceased historian Jaime Ybarra (who, regrettably, succumbed to COVID in his prime) asserted, after an analysis of 19th-century electoral processes, that substantial efforts and resources were devoted particularly at the local and regional levels, causing significant controversies, which at times escalated to violence, and were orchestrated with a quasi-religious regularity and could not be dismissed as mere theatrical displays for the benefit of the incumbent authority. He unequivocally declared their importance and advocated for their thorough study. Ybarra's assertion posited that these electoral events constituted a democratic tradition with roots more profound than commonly perceived, extending across the entire nation[2]. It is this thesis that we endeavor to substantiate in the subsequent pages.

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1 The article's title refers, as the reader may have noticed, to the famous essay by Germán Arciniegas *Entre el miedo y la libertad* (1956).

2 See: Jaime Ybarra, *Archipiélagos de poder. Historia electoral venezolana, 1870-1888*, Valencia (Venezuela), Asociación de Profesores de la Universidad de Carabobo, 2014.

In the tumultuous year of 2016, Ybarra accomplished a notable feat –a *democratic* feat, one might assert– by uniting historians of diverse persuasions. Some among them would not typically have collaborated, yet they collectively produced a book comprising distinct studies on 19th-century electoral processes under Ybarra's coordination. Ybarra shares the coordinator role on the cover with none other than the then Governor of Carabobo, Francisco Ameliach. This development raised concerns and sparked discussions about the regional government potentially influencing the editorial process. Nevertheless, the compiled works exhibit substantial intellectual rigor, and the authors, in every instance, command high regard[3]. By perusing the book, cross-referencing it with additional data, and heeding Ybarra's guidance, we aim to gain a panoramic understanding of Venezuela's pre-democratic voting landscape. This exploration may offer insights into the challenges and opportunities inherent in post-democratic voting.

"Francoquijanismo": the other tradition

The primary issue with the extensive voting tradition identified by Ybarra is the existence (and to a large extent, a resurgence) of another tradition, equally or even more potent, known during the era of López as "*francoquijanismo*." Though the term is now obsolete –regrettably, solely the word– within the Venezuelan political lexicon of the 1930s and 1940s, it denoted a spectrum of deceitful practices and acts of advantage employed by governments to secure electoral victories. It would be ahistorical to claim the presence of *francoquijanismo* during Guzmán Blanco's era, either because the term did not exist or because electoral

3 Jaime Ybarra & Francisco Ameliach Orta (Compiladores), *El mosaico electoral venezolano. Historia de procesos y formalidades electorales del siglo XIX y XX venezolano* (sic), Valencia (Venezuela), Gobernación del Estado Carabobo, 2016.

freedom was so limited the neologism was unnecessary, though not due to its essential absence. The massive fraud of 1897 bore a considerable resemblance to *francoquijanismo*, as did all elections during the Gómez regime (though this topic awaits thorough documentary study). If there is any distinction, it lies in the lack of concern for concealment, a nuance that became imperative from 1935 onward.

The term "*Francoquijanism*" traces its origins to Juan Francisco Franco Quijano (1896-1973), arguably the first individual in Venezuelan history deserving the title of *electoral technician*[4]. Born to a Venezuelan exile in Colombia, he earned a degree in philosophy from the Colegio San Bartolomé in Bogotá and pursued a career in the Conservative Party. Amid the Liberal Revolution of March 1934, he diverged from his father's path and sought exile in Venezuela. Successfully practicing law, he gained renown and, by 1937, had earned the trust of López Contreras, serving as an advisor in his circle. Franco Quijano is credited with establishing the government's party, the Bolivarian Civic Group (commonly known as the "Bolivarian Civics"[5]), and likely contributed to the president's somewhat conservative Bolivarianism, reminiscent of the Colombian Conservative Party. Moreover, drawing from his Colombian experience, Franco Quijano presented an additional dimension: while Venezuela had not experienced competitive elections for fifty years, Colombia, despite its inherent opacity, had

4 Certainly, that's how it is designated in the *Diccionario de Historia de Venezuela* by the Empresas Polar Foundation (https://bibliofep.fundacionempresaspolar.org/dhv/entradas/f/franco-quijano-juan-francisco/ We have no prior identification of an individual deserving of such a classification.

5 About this organization created by López Contreras, see: José Alberto Olivar, "La Agrupación Cívica Bolivariana: instrumento de control político electoral del Postgomecismo (1937-1942)", *Mañongo*, No. 28, Vol. XV, January-June 2007, pp. 153-167

a relatively more competitive electoral landscape. This allowed a conservative politician to confront and win elections in a seemingly cleaner manner. This aspect likely left López Contreras and his associates astounded, grappling with the unprecedented scenario of an opposition consistently winning elections, surpassing even the attempts by the courts to rectify the situation.

The success of Franco Quijano's consultancy was resounding. Let's look at some facts: after the victory of the left-wing opposition in the Caracas elections in June, there was another, even greater, victory in the municipal elections of Zulia in October (the left won in six of the nine districts, very significantly in Maracaibo and in the Bolívar oil district); and a year later, on December 11, 1938, in the following municipal elections in Caracas, the left won nineteen parishes. It was an overwhelming growth that made many think (and many fear) that something like Spain might be coming, a reality all Venezuelans knew. But the figures from 1940 never cease to surprise: the government had completely turned the tables in two years, and the Bolivarian civics swept the entire country[6]. What happened? Indeed, the left was already hopelessly divided between what would soon become Democratic Action (AD) and the communists, with fierce fights among themselves (in a short time, communists and post-Gomecistas allied themselves against AD). Some may have feared things were going too far. In addition, the government had a national and well-oiled organization, the CívicasBolivarianas. Nevertheless, we cannot exclude from consideration what was universally labeled *Francoquijanismo*: the issuance of double documentation to voters enabling them to vote in multiple locations; manipulation of voting tables and scrutiny; arbitrary detention of opponents; suspension of opposition

6 Data on election results were taken from: Juan Bautista Fuenmayor, 1928-1948, Caracas, s/n, 1968; and Antonio García Ponce, *Ocaso de la República Liberal Autocrática. 1935-1945*, Caracas, Fundación Rómulo Betancourt, 2010.

candidates; relocation of government voters to specific polling stations, among other tactics. In defense of Franco Quijano, despite numerous complaints, no direct connection to any of these irregularities could be definitively established. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that virtually everyone in the country considered him the orchestrator behind these activities.

In 1943, Franco Quijano advised López Contreras' successor, Isaías Medina Angarita, on creating the Venezuelan Democratic Party. Exiled after October 18, 1945, he returned with the military coup that overthrew Rómulo Gallegos in 1948 and was once again employed as an election organizer, but as he was part of that unsolved mystery that is the assassination of Carlos Delgado Chalbaud, he was imprisoned for a short time, and then devoted himself to the private practice of law. Notably, in 1968, he published one of the most important books on electoral techniques in *Venezuela: Sistemática electoral*. In any case, *Francoquijanismo* was, nevertheless, an expression of Venezuela becoming democratized. I started from the principle that there would be competitive elections, or something close enough to them, that opponents would participate and that, to defeat them, one had to save appearances at least and limit oneself to advantage (although as things moved away from the big cities, that could change). López Contreras cannot be denied his stature as a modernizer and democratizer: it was not easy to transform a regime characterized by prisons, forced labor, torture, exile, and homicide in dealing with opponents into a democracy, especially amidst the tumultuous thirties, with the shadow of the Spanish Civil War and soon the looming Second World War. Regardless of any criticisms that may be voiced, it represented an extraordinary improvement over what preceded it. The proof lies in that the left-wing and democratic opposition, upon assuming power

in 1958, did not hesitate to acknowledge his status as a former constitutional president and Senator for Life.

However, as mentioned, the fact that the term *Francoquijanismo*, in a strict sense, may not be applicable beyond the 1930s and 1940s does not imply that what it encapsulated was not a tradition as enduring as that of voting. It constituted a lengthy experience replete with impactful and distressing events (the misfortunes of *Mocho* Hernández never failed to evoke sorrow or pity) that conspired against the act of voting. In the historical narrative of Venezuela, the balance between fear and freedom was markedly tilted, often leaning heavily towards the former. Let us briefly examine some of Venezuelan history's most notable intersections between fear and freedom.

"The people want to, but are not allowed to choose"

Between 1830 and 1846, Venezuela stood as one of the world's freest and most stable democracies. It's not a matter of perpetuating idealizations of this period, conventionally known as the "conservative oligarchy" thanks to José Gil Fortoul[7] and largely fueled by end-of-century nostalgia, but when compared to the nation of caudillos and civil wars, this era seems to be a kind of lost golden age. While not precisely so[8], the respect

7 In 1907, José Gil Fortoul's highly influential "Constitutional History of Venezuela" was published, ultimately spanning three volumes. In a remarkably irreverent departure from the official narrative of yellow liberalism, Fortoul asserted that the conservatives, contrary to liberal claims since 1840, were not just an oligarchy but had also functioned as one. Consequently, he divided the initial phase of republican life into two epochs: the conservative oligarchy (1830-1848) and the liberal oligarchy (1848-1858). This periodization left a lasting imprint on societal memory.

8 For a serene understanding of the period: Elías Pino Iturrieta, *País archipiélago: Venezuela, 1830-1858,* Caracas, Fundación Bigott, 2001. Another clarifying

for liberties, deliberation, autonomy of powers, stability, and relative alternability were indeed unique at a time when the two emblematic leaders of Latin America were Adolfo López de Santa Anna and Juan Manuel Rosas. Although there was a caudillo, José Antonio Páez, whose personalistic influence over the system conflicted with the idea of a democratic republic, in 1835, he faced a coup that ousted the democratically elected José María Vargas. Merely expressing his disapproval sufficed for the country to follow him, enabling the president to return to power[9].

While the event is celebrated as an adherence of Páez to legality, which is largely true, it also demonstrated that his power extended beyond institutional boundaries. Nevertheless, during that period, a reasonable framework of deliberation, freedom of press, and liberal reforms were respected. There is consensus that elections were competitive to the extent that in 1835, a candidate other than the one promoted by Páez, the aforementioned Vargas[10], could win. What other countries in the world offered a similar landscape in 1830? Great Britain, the United States, and perhaps a few more. In all cases, there were significant limitations on voting rights (in Venezuela, for instance, there were no racial restrictions, only financial ones), and generally more scandals in elections, such as vote-buying, physical altercations leading to the suspension of polling stations, and outright fraud.

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work: Diego Bautista Urbaneja, *El gobierno de Carlos Soublette, o la importancia de los normal*, Caracas, Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, 2006.

9 The movement, led by Santiago Mariño, but which brought together various dissatisfied groups, including the Church, is known as the Revolution of the Reforms.

10 Classics on the topic are: Eleonora Gabaldón, *José Vargas, presidente de la República de Venezuela (las elecciones presidenciales de 1835)*, Caracas, FUNRES, 1986; and Alberto Navas Blanco, Las elecciones presidenciales en Venezuela: 1830-1854, Caracas, Academia Nacional de la Historia, 1993.

That period only endured until 1846. In the narrative of the Liberal Party, which had emerged six years earlier as opposition to the *paecista* group, which it dubbed the *oligarchy* and later *conservatives*, that year marked the beginning of all our troubles. It was an election year. The main liberal leader, Antonio Leocadio Guzmán, was the clear favorite. A combination of weariness with *paecismo*, in power in Caracas since the days of Gran Colombia, an economic crisis, and Guzmán's inflammatory rhetoric gave him a favorable wind. Still, there was a widespread fear that the victory would not be recognized. Consequently, an uprising erupted in Aragua, known in historiography as the Peasant Revolution of 1846, which, among other banners, raised support for Guzmán. There is no evidence that he was behind the movement, but as soon as Páez and other military leaders mobilized to quell the movement –something they did without any difficulty– Guzmán was accused of conspiracy, arrested, tried, and sentenced to death (the sentence was commuted to exile). Without the main opposition candidate, the government's candidate, José Tadeo Monagas, had no difficulty triumphing. However, this was only the beginning: sensing that popular favor was with Guzmán and desiring to free themselves from Páez's influence, Monagas approached the liberals (he was the one who commuted Guzmán's death sentence). The result was that the conservatives, the majority in Congress, discussed his removal. While this was underway, the liberals orchestrated an assault on Congress on January 24, 1848. Monagas remained in power, supported by the liberals, prompting Páez to attempt a response similar to 1835, rising to restore institutional order. This time he was defeated, imprisoned, and sent into exile[11].

11 See on this subject: Alexandra Beatriz Mendoza de Acosta, *Páez y Monagas. Relaciones del poder caudillista, 1846-1849*, Caracas, Ediciones del Instituto de Altos Estudios del Poder Electoral, 2022; Rafael Ramón Castellanos, *Páez, peregrino y proscripto (1848-1851)*, Caracas, Academia Nacional de la Historia, 1975.

It was a four-year crisis during which Venezuela slid toward authoritarianism. Typically, the disaster is solely attributed to the liberals, especially for the almost literal execution of the Congress in 1848. However, it was actually the result of actions from both sides and institutions' inability to channel the conflict. Moreover, for my purposes here, it left a lesson that would persist for a hundred years, until the municipal elections in Caracas in 1937: "the government does not lose elections." The hope that everything could change with the votes, harbored around Guzmán in 1846, was lost. In one of the foundational documents of Venezuelan democratic thought, the Proclamation of Palma Sola, Juan Crisóstomo Falcón explained it with two phrases that would become famous: "The issue is not whether the designed laws are good or bad; the issue is that the right to make them is not yours, but that of the majority because in republics, the exercise of all social powers belongs to them"; and "the anarchy in which we live is not the cause but the effect; the cause of which is its mother; people want to, but are not allowed to choose."[12]

Falcón wrote thirteen years later. Between 1848 and 1858, Monagas had been the great caudillo, ruling in a highly personalized manner without opposition from the conservative faction. While there were elections, it is an exaggeration to claim that they were competitive. Ultimately, Monagas also rid himself of the liberals, achieving the miracle of what was termed fusion in the political discourse of the time: the liberals and conservatives united to oust him from power. As expected, the fusionist idyll was short-lived, and the liberals rose in arms in 1859. This is the moment when Falcón was writing. He was disembarking to assume the supreme command of the revolution that had erupted

12 Proclama del General Falcón en Palmasola, *Documentos que hicieron historia. Siglo y medio de vida republicana, 1810-1961,* Caracas, Presidencia de la República, 1962, pp. 527-528

in February, known for its primary banner, federalism, and would come to be called the Revolution or Federal War, the longest and most consequential conflict in Venezuela. Strictly speaking, it lasted from 1859 to 1863, but in reality, it was part of a state close to anarchy (Falcón was correct in using this term) that extended until at least 1872.

By that moment (July 24, 1859, a date likely not coincidental), the rebellion had spread widely and taken on the characteristics of a social war, with Ezequiel Zamora, Falcón's brother-in-law, emerging as a prominent leader, notably for his involvement in the uprising of 1846. However, Falcón, a general and bachelor, and the head of the landowners and politicians clan in the Coro region, to which Zamora had joined through marriage to Estefanía Falcón, rightfully held the supreme command. He was also the one who could provide an ideological context for the uprising, while Zamora, a more skilled military leader but with fewer scholarly pursuits, took charge of the operations. "I am not the one bringing the war," he declared in the same proclamation, "it already exists, declared by the nation en masse against the oppressors, tyrants who audaciously appointed themselves rulers by divine right and, by infernal duty, impose on the people the obligation to obey them. Fools! How they forget the courage of Venezuelans!" In essence, this war was not declared by the liberals but by the *oligarchs* or *godos*: "The electoral violence of 1846 gave birth to the year 1848 and all that ensued."[13]

However, it had been the conservatives themselves who gathered at the Convention of Valencia (a constituent assembly convened to find a solution to the crisis) in 1858 and instituted universal suffrage for men. In part, they sought to curb the

13 Idem.

hurricane that erupted a year later. They held elections where they maintained enough control to do so, and thus, no less than a count (though the deeply committed family had renounced the title), Manuel Felipe Tovar, became the first president of Venezuela elected by universal suffrage. In what became the fate of almost all civilians who arrived in power through elections, he could not complete his term: he could not control the revolution, and the army, along with a broad sector of conservatives, believed that the only solution was to bring Páez back to perform the miracle of 1835 (which he had not been able to do in 1848). Tovar resigned, leaving power to the venerable republican and patriot from Bolívar's days, Pedro Gual. Neither his legend nor his gray hair served much purpose: the army simply staged a coup and shortly thereafter handed power to Páez, who, in a famous decree on January 1, 1862, abolished all powers, essentially dismantling the entire republic, and assumed a dictatorship with almost absolute monarchic powers[14].

But Falcón was right: the issue was not whether the laws Páez proclaimed were good (and he proclaimed a lot, all very progressive!), but rather the right to make them (something he conspicuously lacked); and, above all, that the people wanted to choose, not endure a self-appointed Supreme Chief. The point is that Páez failed, and by May 1863, the federals, now led by a young officer who began to emerge in the war, Antonio Guzmán Blanco, son of Antonio Leocadio, were surrounding Caracas. Importantly, the idea of elections was planted: Guzmán Blanco proposed an agreement to end the war amicably, leave the government to an assembly with members appointed by both sides and call for

14 Decree of January 1, 1862 organizing the Government of the Supreme Chief, https://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra-visor/decreto-de-1-de-enero-de-1862-organizando-el-gobierno-del-jefe-supremo/html/3f6b135b-f079-4937-80d6-46d653d648e8_2.html

elections (truthfully, in 1861, Páez had proposed something similar: a government of national unity, with him as president and Falcón as vice president[15]). Such was the Treaty of Coche. Elections were held for a Constituent Assembly, and after a new constitution was promulgated, for the president, which Falcón won.

However, the fate of overthrown elected presidents could not be overcome, not even by the now Marshal Falcón. His government collapsed in 1868 amid numerous armed conflicts with other warlords, essentially a continuation of the war. Falcón went into exile following a series of major and minor wars until Guzmán Blanco defeated the last pockets of resistance in 1872, established himself as the victorious great warlord, and, of course, called for elections... But he had no intention of being overthrown. In fact, those elections marked the decline of voting in Venezuela. Guzmán Blanco claimed he won with 99% of the votes. Faced with protests of fraud, in 1874, he decreed that, to avoid controversies in the scrutiny, votes would henceforth be public and signed. In other words, each voter would publicly declare whom they voted for and sign it in the minutes book. The result was obvious: only those who openly supported him voted. It quickly went beyond, imposing fines for those who did not vote. It was the beginning of seventy years of harsh autocracy.

The so-called "Swiss Constitution"[16] of 1881 established a second-degree system whereby the people elected the Congress, which in turn appointed members of the Federal Council, one for each state (the federation's states had been reduced to nine), who

15 This transpired in the interview between Falcón and Páez in Campo de Carabobo. While Falcón accepted the proposal, the rest of the liberals opposed it, perceiving it as a sign of weakness that prompted them to go all out. The war extended for two years.

16 It was called that because it was inspired by that of the Alpine country.

would take turns serving as the Republic's president every two years. Although the goal was to ensure that all the major warlords involved in the Council had a guaranteed turn to be president, the truth is that the system was a disaster from the start. The first appointed president, Joaquín Crespo, bypassed all other councilors to return power to Guzmán Blanco in 1886 in the so-called "Acclamation," a kind of national movement that practically begged him to return to power. Guzmán Blanco did so but decided to step down before the term ended and appoint an interim leader. Crespo dreamed of being chosen, but the pick for the 1888-1890 term turned out to be Juan Pablo Rojas Paúl, a civilian. Crespo responded with a rebellion. However, Rojas Paúl did the same by breaking with Guzmán Blanco, who was already in Paris, so no one paid attention to Crespo. After the term ended, the system finally seemed to work institutionally, and the presidency fell into the hands of another civilian, RaimundoAndueza Palacio. At times, this made some think, with astonishment, that the republic was starting to resemble something akin to a modern liberal state: two civilians in the presidency in a row!

Andueza Palacio decided to reform the constitution because the bienniums were impractical, which everyone agreed on. However, there was a problem: the president believed that the new four-year term began with him and not, as expected, with the next elected president. This was the opportunity Joaquín Crespo was waiting for. Once again, he rose, unleashing a conflict of great proportions, with the Liberal Party split in half. His banner was to defend legality against Andueza's*continuity*, so the new civil war was called the Legalist Revolution. In seven months, with the country in ruins, Crespo took Caracas and became the new

national warlord[17]. All of this history, which may be somewhat detailed for the scope of this work, serves a purpose: to see to what extent the vote was completely diluted. Technically, it was a democracy; the people voted (publicly and signed, it's true, but they voted) for a Congress that appointed advisors. However, everything indicates that, in the end, the election was in the hands of negotiations among powerful men, and when one disagreed, they settled the matter on the battlefield.

Crespo came to power with promises of democratic renewal. In fact, he convened a Constituent Assembly attended by many of Venezuela's brightest minds, discussing cutting-edge issues such as women's suffrage (which narrowly failed to be approved). With the 1892 Constitution, universal and direct suffrage for men was established. In fact, Crespo could have been elected president in 1894 with this system and an overwhelming 90% or more of the votes, with no evidence of fraud, at least on a massive scale. Freedom of the press was respected, and even a Workers' Congress was convened in 1896, where discussions about socialism began. Everything seemed to be going smoothly, but there were two events Taita Crespo did not foresee: a massive economic crisis due to the fall in coffee prices, the main export product, state debts, and the aftermath of the war; and the emergence of a powerful opposition party, the Nationalist Liberal Party, which chose a very popular politician, José Manuel "*El Mocho*" Hernández, as its

17 For an informed and lively narration of all these events, the classic by Ramón J. Velásquez, *La caída del liberalismoamarillo: tiempo y drama de Antonio Paredes* (1972) is still of use. Another classic is: Manuel Alfredo Rodríguez, *El Capitolio de Caracas; un siglo de historia de Venezuela* (Caracas, Congreso de la República, 1975). A monographic study on the Federal Council: Alberto Navas Blanco, "El Consejo Federal y el modelo oligocrático de gobierno en Venezuela de fines del siglo XIX", in Ybarra & Ameliach (coord.), Op. Cit. pp. 99-111

leader[18]. Moreover, *El Mocho*, who had lived in the United States, implemented American electoral techniques with notable results: in a situation similar to that of 1846, everything indicated that in 1897, *mochistas* would win overwhelmingly[19]. The story is well known: what almost everyone considers one of the biggest frauds in history was perpetrated. The government candidate, Ignacio Andrade, "swept" with over 99% of the votes. There are testimonies indicating measures such as imprisoning *Mocho* supporters in towns to prevent them from being at the voting tables, but the magnitude of the results speaks of a blatant fabrication of the outcomes.

Thus begins the misfortune of *El Mocho*, a sort of eternal but endearing loser in Venezuelan politics. He rose in arms –another civil war!– in what is known as the Queipa Revolution. The movement was a disaster, but it changed history, although not in the way *Mocho* supporters dreamed: Joaquín Crespo, who took command of government forces, died in Mata Carmelera due to the accurate aim of a sniper. The result was not *El Mocho's* seizure of power but the collapse of Ignacio Andrade's government (although he continued to fight until he managed to capture him), a kind of everyone-against-everyone situation. Seizing the opportunity, Cipriano Castro, a continuist exiled since 1892 in Cúcuta, organized his own revolution and invaded the country through Táchira in May 1899. It was the Restorative Revolution. Castro profited from the chaos, entering Caracas in October of that year, swearing to "restore" the shattered yellow liberalism after so many wars and dissensions but, in practice, leading it to

18 He was called "Mocho" because he lost two fingers in one of the many civil wars of the time.

19 A recent study: Frank Rodríguez, "El Mocho Hernández y la campaña electoral presidencial de 1897", in Jaime Ybarra & Francisco Ameliach (coord.), Op. Cit., pp. 191-211

the grave. The lesson from Mocho Hernández was the same as Antonio Leocadio Guzmán's in '46: *governments do not lose elections*, and the electoral path is for the naive or the deceitful.

However, according to research by scholars like Ybarra[20], Francisco Soto Oráa and Robinzon Meza[21], and Hancer González[22], elections were conscientiously organized in towns, cities, and regions. Money was invested, controversies erupted, factions were formed, and candidacies were shaped with campaigns, media support, and public events. It was not a mere charade. The conclusion is that elections could make a difference at the local and regional levels at least. Perhaps voters chose what seemed less undesirable among the feasible options. It is likely that while the grand national gamewas beyond their reach, they could influence matters in their daily lives. And that, however humble, kept the flame of voting alive. As seen in 1897 and 1937, Falcón was right: the people want to choose. They may not be allowed, but they want to choose.

Epilogue: Before the resurrection

To the elections of 1846 and 1897, we must add the 1913 election as another fundamental milestone in the autocratization of Venezuela. Cipriano Castro established an outright dictatorship, much more authoritarian than that of Guzmán Blanco and, of

20 Jaime Ybarra, *Archipiélagos de poder. Historia electoral venezolana, 1870-1888,* Valencia (Venezuela), Asociación de Profesores de la Universidad de Carabobo, 2014.

21 Francisco Soto Oráa & Robinzon Meza, "Las elecciones de posguzmancismo y las intervenciones del poder central en los grandes estados (1888-1890)", in Ybarra & Ameliacha (coord.), Op. Cit., pp. 139-164

22 Hancer González, "El Gran Estado de los Andes y sus procesos electorales", in Ybarra & Ameliacha (coord.), Op. Cit., pp. 111-137

course, Crespo. He no longer needed to commit frauds: after defeating all his enemies (including the *mochistas*[23]) allied in the Libertadora Revolution (1901-1903), he simply had no legal opposition. In the 1901 Constitution, he established the third-grade system that persisted until 1945:

> Article 82.- On October 28 of the last year of the Constitutional period, the Municipal Councils of each State will convene and vote for the President, first Vice President, and second Vice President of the Republic, declaring the vote of the District as that of the absolute majority of its members. The results of the vote will be submitted to the State Legislative Assembly.
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> Article 83.- The State Legislative Assembly, in the first days of its session, will scrutinize the votes of the Municipal Councils of the State and declare the citizens who have obtained the majority of the votes in the Districts as candidates of the State. A record of the results will be drawn up, of which three copies will be prepared and sent: one to the Senate of the Republic, another to the Principal Registry of the State, and another to the Federal Court. In the case of a tie in the votes covered by this article, chance will decide.

23 Castro freed Mocho Hernández as soon as he entered Caracas and appointed him minister. However, very quickly there is a breakup and Mocho rises again, but once again he is defeated and imprisoned. For this reason, the Mochistas joined their former enemies to defeat Castro. With the Blockade of the coasts in 1902, Mocho once again reconciled with Castro, in favor of the defense of the homeland, but after so many political ups and downs, his popularity began to decline.

> Article 84.- The Senate of the Republic will carry out the general scrutiny, and if none of the Candidates has obtained an absolute majority, and in case of a tie, the Legislative Chambers will constitute an Electoral Body, and the election will be perfected for the Candidates who have obtained the highest number of votes. The grouping of Senators and Deputies from each State will represent one vote, which will be the majority of the grouping[24].

Therefore, the people would choose the municipal councils, the deputies, and the legislative assemblies of the states (which, in turn, would choose the senators). And they, on the patriotic 28th of October[25], would choose the rest. In the end, it was easy to control the municipalities, especially because under the Gómez regime, civilian leaders (who, despite the name, were always colonels) and state presidents (governors) had virtually police-like power over everyone, including elections. Hence, the room for surprises was almost nonexistent. The last one was in 1913 when the journalist Félix Montes was proposed as a candidate against the then widely beloved Juan Vicente Gómez. After Castro's authoritarian, conflict-ridden, and always financially tight government, the blow Gómez dealt him in 1908 was seen with joy by most Venezuelans and the international community. His first five years, in addition, were a period of consolidation, making amends with everyone, starting with Castro's enemies (whom he had defeated as his most talented general), the old yellow liberals, and even *El Mocho* Hernández. When the time came to call for elections for the 1914-1919 term, there were no doubts about the favorite candidate... Until the

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24 Constitution of the United States of Venezuela 1901. https://derechodelacultura.org/ Own translation]

25 Saint Simon's Day. Until the 20th century, the day of the Liberator's saint was celebrated, not his birthday. This became popular when Venezuelans abandoned the custom of celebrating saints.

journalist Rafael Arévalo González launched the candidacy of fellow journalist and lawyer Montes. It's challenging to think that he could have beaten Gómez's prestige, who came from his triumph in the Battle of Ciudad Bolívar and his status as the "Father of Peace," but it was the moment for the Benemérito to strike: announcing a supposed invasion by Cipriano Castro from abroad, he mobilized the army that was already starting to reform and modernize; he imprisoned the conspirators, real or supposed, like González (Montes was able to go into exile), and took the opportunity to dissolve the Government Council he had created in 1909, where some yellow liberals were (it wasn't until then that Gómez completely broke with yellow liberalism) and El Mocho Hernández, who then suffered his final political defeat[26].

Without rivals, Gómez was elected president, but, in a show of force not seen since the days of Páez in the 1830s, he decidef not to assume the office but to stay as Commander in Chief of the Army, leaving Victorino Márquez Bustillos as the provisional president. It was a provisionality that lasted almost the entire term, until 1919. For everyone, the situation was clear: power was in the hands of the army commander, and the day-to-day administration, like that of a foreman on a hacienda, was carried out by a civilian.

It was the demise of elections. They continued to be called, naturally, but to no one, or very few, did it matter. Hence, the enormous significance of what happened in 1937. It was a true resurrection of the vote. Like the sleep of the just, it was there, latent, only waiting for its moment. And it came, like a whirlwind, after the death of Gómez. Despite all the hindrances and the *franquoquijanismo* of the hour, it managed to move forward, even

26 A detailed study on this process: Napoleón Franceschi, *El gobierno de Juan Vicente Gómez, 1908-1914*, Caracas, Universidad Metropolitana, 2018.

to triumph. Despite everything, the people, who never gave up on their desire, were finally allowed to choose.