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January 3, 2026: There Are Days That Define Eras

I write these lines exactly one month after the capture of Nicolás Maduro and Cilia Flores by the United States. It is a historic event whose still unfolding consequences we still see in everyday life, make it difficult to see clearly where it is leading. And although it was a cinematic episode, open to multiple interpretations, the fact is that its outcome depended on foreign intervention, which constitutes, above all, a collective failure as a society and reveals the extent of control imposed on the country as a whole. Yet it also opens up a possibility. Maduro is, at once, a figure of the past and a reminder: the impunity of those who cling to power is not infinite.

January 3, 2026 opened a small window for democratization of the Venezuelan system. It is an opportunity that will not be given to us from the outside and that is not guaranteed, but for which we do have the necessary historical foundation to build the strength capable of transforming wounds into scars, and these into marks of collective learning.

Those of us Venezuelans born in the 1990s —as well as those born in the 1980s and 2000s, both abroad and in the country— have known only an uninterrupted succession of historic events shaped by crisis. From the collapse of democracy to the emergence

of a new political system that, under the banner of popular participation, gradually eroded pluralism until it became closed and brutal, a system that, even in its collapse, has not yet fully disappeared.

A Bit of History

Political systems in Venezuela have tended to last between two and four decades. In the twentieth century, democracy was the great promise, the great achievement, and also the great surprise: it managed to consolidate itself in a country marked by a *caudillo*, strongman tradition and civil wars, doing so by imposing a representative democratic model with a strong social orientation. However, that system collapsed when it forgot its foundational values and failed to reinvent itself and remain true to its essence. Although the country did not return exactly to the past, a convergence of several of our historical ills began to take shape, now intensified and entangled in the geopolitical dilemmas of the twenty-first century.

We had faced international pressure and historical setbacks before. The blockade imposed by European powers between 1902 and 1903, in an effort to collect unpaid debts, offered the *caudillo* Cipriano Castro the opportunity to stir national sentiment, while at the same time granting the United States a key role in deterring, monitoring, and mediating European involvement in what became known as the "Roosevelt Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine. That same Castro would be displaced by his *compadre* Juan Vicente Gómez at the end of 1908, with the aim of reaching a better understanding with the Americans and handling their investments and interests with kid gloves —investments and interests that would mark the beginning of the oil industry in Venezuela. Meanwhile, with iron fists, Gómez repressed dissent

and imposed peace in the graveyards, in forced labor on the roads, and in the prison of *La Rotunda*.

The Past as Present Heritage

After Gómez's death and the beginning of 1936, the continuity of the system in the hands of a military officer he trusted, General Eleazar López Contreras, posed a central dilemma between transition and continuity. Although there was, from within the presidency, a willingness to modernize the State and introduce gradual concessions, it was the student mobilizations, citizen organization, and public debate in the press —a true wellspring of ideas— that drove the consolidation of democracy as a collective struggle.

As the historian Manuel Caballero recalled, the protests in Caracas on February 14, 1936 may perhaps be considered the birth of democracy in modern Venezuela. However, the nearly five and a half years of López Contreras's government were marked by a zigzag course: the episode of February 14 —when the people took to the streets despite repression to reject the imposition of new censorship, resulting in both injuries and deaths— was followed by the oil strike and the expulsion of opposition leaders in 1937. The aspirations for universal suffrage and for political participation with broader rights would only begin to materialize a decade later and would consolidate with the 1958 governability pacts.

Another historical landmark is 1968 —a year of international turbulence— when Venezuela held its third consecutive presidential election under democracy. The opposition won, represented by the Social Christians of COPEI, against Acción Democrática, who had governed for a decade. Despite heightened tensions, the government conceded defeat. It lost by a narrow margin —but it lost. It was the first time something like that had

happened in the country. One must imagine what all of that meant for a country that in three decades had taken an extraordinary leap and aspired to even more. Later, it became customary. We must make that happen again, and it will be an event to which we must give its proper dimension and appreciation.

In democracy, majorities change and there is dynamism. In a dictatorship, they impose upon you —as if life did not move forward— a one-dimensional moment, an infinite trap. Chavismo has been the imposition and capture of a particular social moment, of temporary majorities, in order to turn political and economic power into private property.

The Threads that Run Through our History

We can identify at least two guiding threads with which Venezuelan reality has been woven: the authoritarian militarist and the democratic civilian. Both weigh on this present moment in which we must envision a better model of society and a democracy that understands the country. One that offers lasting solutions and includes mechanisms for renewal in difficult times.

The authoritarian tradition is associated with order and the top-down authority of the *caudillo* or of those who capture power. Within that imaginary stand Gómez and Marcos Pérez Jiménez, one as pacifier and the other as builder of order and of "spectacular modernity," as Lisa Blackmore titled her study. They are also linked to torture and political imprisonment, a recurring trail in Venezuelan history that we frequently tend to minimize, perhaps because other forms of political violence —such as assassinations of heads of state or other more public killings— are perceived as alien to our experience.

Chávez reinforced the imaginary of order during his initial phase —through his anti-corruption campaign and his promise to overhaul the system. The first few years of the 20th century brought a loss of a rare opportunity: a demographic dividend, a democracy capable of improvement and reform, an international economic context favorable to commodities, and a country rich in talent in all its forms. The inherited failures were severe and the challenges enormous, but there remained the capacity to overcome them.

The other tradition, the civilian one, is the one we must invoke now in this fragile, yet captivating space because of its possibilities. We have numerous examples at hand: men and women from different generations and commitments who, throughout nearly two hundred years of republican history, have envisioned a better country. I am thinking about Cecilio Acosta and his aversion to political hatred; of Rómulo Gallegos and the "patriotic sorrow" he bequeathed as both a lesson and a sentiment to all those he educated and to those of us who have read him; of Augusto Mijares, Mario Briceño Iragorry, and Mariano Picón Salas, who, from different ideological positions, shared a firm defense of civilian life and —as the latter put it— the conviction of sharing the condition of being Venezuelan, "that is, of acting and thinking within a country in a turbulent and contradictory process of growth."

Added to this are the pioneering women who fought for their rights, for suffrage, and for the building of a progressive society: Carmen Clemente Travieso, Cecilia Pimentel, and María Teresa Castillo; the cultural excellence of Sofía Ímber and Virginia Betancourt; as well as the tenacity of Mercedes Pulido. The names are countless —and even more so are those of the women and men who today work for Venezuela, within or beyond its borders, perhaps with nostalgia for what has been lost, but with the

conviction to rebuild and to achieve democracy as both a system of government and a way of life.

The Political Game and the Conclusion

There are months that last weeks and years that define decades. The current political moment, in its fragility and with the addendum of the "interim government," can generate an almost schizophrenic landscape: at times it seems that progress is being made; at others, that everything remains the same.

The political game, however, cannot be reduced to a competition to please the interests of the United States. We have, unfortunately, found ourselves in a kind of telematic protectorate. But this must be temporary. The pursuit of independence in freedom is the nonnegotiable purpose.

For that reason, all sectors committed to democracy must be brought together, inside and outside the country, in order to reach essential agreements. We must acknowledge past defeats, but also the baggage of our fights and the successes that are part of our shared heritage. We must unite to secure the full release of all political prisoners, bring an end to censorship, and open a truly plural debate. We must begin the reconstruction of democracy through free general elections, which should serve as the foundation for what comes next.

It is a critical and delicate moment, but we certainly possess the strength to transform it into something fruitful. May this crisis, which today appears as conclusive, become an opportunity.