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**Venezuelan Political Systems and Chavez's Competitive Authoritarian Regime**

**Alejandro Diaz**

Contact email: [alexdiav89@hotmail.com](mailto:alexdiav89@hotmail.com)

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\_\_\_\_\_  
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## **Abstract**

# Venezuelan Political Systems and Chavez's Competitive Authoritarian Regime

## MASTER OF ARTS IN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Alejandro Diaz

December, 2015

The following work argues that Venezuela's political system changed from an electoral democracy to a Competitive Autocracy with Hugo Chavez's arrival to power in 1999. As Corrales and Penfold have argued in their work, Venezuela can be considered an electoral autocracy. More specifically, based on Levitsky and Way's definition of the term, this work argues that both Chavez and Maduro have led a Competitive Authoritarian political system, where pronounced autocratic practices are accompanied by competitive elections.

Drawing upon work published by Venezuelan politicians, historians, journalists, and social scientists, this work traces Venezuelan political systems from colonial times until 1958, when Venezuela became an electoral democracy. By pointing out Venezuela's severe centuries-old socioeconomic problems, the researcher argues that these structural realities explain much of the political instability, militarism, and oligarchic rule that has plagued the country during its more than 200 years of independent history. Moreover, by providing a chronology of the major autocratic political actions and overwhelming electoral victories of the Bolivarian Revolution, this thesis attempts to support the argument that the regime in place since 1999 is Competitive Authoritarian.

Key Words: Democracy, Competitive Authoritarianism, Venezuelan Political History, Hugo Chavez, Hybrid Regime, Caudillismo, Militarism

Dedicated to my beloved parents  
Grasibel and Alejandro.

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## Introduction

Since Hugo Chavez arrival to power in 1999, Venezuela's government has been turning more and more away from liberal democracy. Chavez replaced a 40 year-long limited democracy by a new system where the government controls all state institutions and where civil society is constantly harassed when it opposes the status-quo. Despite this, Chavez enjoyed the support of the majority of Venezuelans during his stay in power. He and his party won all elections, except one, with solid majorities between 1999 and 2012. After his death in March 2013, Chavez was replaced by Nicolas Maduro, perhaps his most faithful follower. Maduro has continued Chavez record of institutional abuse to suppress the opposition and the media. In February 2014, he strongly repressed student protests in different Venezuelan cities. Human Rights Watch published a 103-page long report where the organization exposes the abuses committed by the Venezuelan authorities against dozens of protesters. Maduro' government has also jailed several main opposition leaders and it heavily censors the media. Moreover, in what may be the most authoritarian action by far from the government, Maduro declared a state of emergency in several cities in three different western Venezuelan states. According to the government, the state of emergency serves to fight contraband and Colombian paramilitaries. Its critics; however, see it as another proof authoritarian rule. What kind of political system has Venezuela turned into since the arrival of Chavez to power? What are the causes that have prevented Venezuela from becoming a liberal democracy still in the 21th century? Why Venezuela seems to have gone a step backwards in its political evolution, after having a democracy for 40 years? These are the main questions the researcher has kept in mind throughout the creation of this work.

This work supports the view that Chavez established a hybrid system in Venezuela; a system with both “democratic and authoritarian elements.”<sup>1</sup> More specifically, as Corrales and

Penfold have argued, Chavez turned Venezuela from a limited democracy to an electoral autocracy.<sup>2</sup> An electoral Autocracy or electoral authoritarian regime is understood to be a non-democratic regime with multiparty elections.<sup>3</sup> According to Diamond, these regimes can be further divided into those where the opposition has a chance to win elections (competitive authoritarian) and those where elections are just a façade, and the government always wins them (Hegemonic Regimes).<sup>4</sup> I argue in this work that both Chavez's and Maduro's regimes can be considered competitive authoritarian. Levitsky and Way define competitive authoritarianism as a system where "constitutional channels exist through which opposition groups compete in a meaningful way for executive power."<sup>5</sup> The Bolivarian Revolution (1999-2015) violates all three democratic principles proposed by Levitsky and Way to determine whether a regime is competitive authoritarian: Free elections, broad protection of civil liberties, and reasonably level playing field.<sup>6</sup> According to the researchers, violating only one of these principles qualifies a regime to be competitive authoritarian.

For a full definition of democracy, I also follow Levitsky and Way's procedural definition. To be a considered a democracy a political system has to have the following "attributes":

- (1) free, fair, and competitive elections; (2) full adult suffrage; (3) broad protection of civil liberties, including freedom of speech, press, and association... (4) the absence of nonelected 'tutelary' authorities (e.g., militaries, monarchies, or religious bodies) that limit elected official's power to govern... [and] ...[5] the existence of a reasonably level playing field between incumbents and opposition.<sup>7</sup>

This work includes a first chapter on the political evolution of Venezuelan society, where all political systems that have existed during Venezuela's history are briefly described. In this chapter, particular attention is given to Caudillismo, militarism and political instability, the

trademarks of the 19<sup>th</sup> and most of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in Venezuela. More importantly, this chapter shows the socioeconomic problems that plagued Venezuela since colonial times. Venezuela has, and continues to be, a third world society, where wealth and education is concentrated on a minority of citizens. Despite many advances, particularly during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many of the problems existing during the colonial period: widespread ignorance, a weak state, poor infrastructure, etc., remain problems of today's Venezuela. The arrival of Chavez to power is ultimately the result of a failure to improve those centuries-old socioeconomic problems, which keep the majority of the Venezuelan population in a sort of primitive cultural state, incompatible with our modern capitalist world. These structural problems also drive the Venezuelan society to elect populist or authoritarian leaders, more concerned with their own personal power ambitions than with building a modern democratic system.

The second chapter concentrates on the competitive authoritarian regimes of Chavez and Maduro. It shows how Chavez concentrated the power of all state institutions in the executive, and gives examples of the use of these institutions either to gain more power, or to repress civil society. Chavez did all this while maintaining a high level of popularity during most of his stay in power, which allowed him to beat the opposition in almost all elections, except for the 2007 referendum. Maduro's government has increased repression against the opposition, and has become more authoritarian than even his predecessor. Perhaps the clearest example of authoritarianism in Maduro's government is that, despite having a majority in the National Assembly, the president has asked twice (2013 and 2015) for decree powers, in the tradition of his predecessor, who received decree power in 1999, 2000, 2007 and 2010. As already mentioned, Maduro has also declared a state of emergency in considerable parts of three major Venezuelan states to combat contraband and paramilitarism.

The following work is based on an intense analysis of dozens of books written by Venezuelan Presidents, historians, journalists, politicians, and social scientists. Being Venezuelan, I had access to all these works in Spanish. This has allowed the researcher to publish material never before made available in English. Thus, in addition to the author's point of view, this work gives foreigners access to points of view strongly held by today's Venezuelan political and intellectual Elite. Being a Venezuelan citizen, who deeply understands his own country's culture, the author also is in a particularly favorable position to fully grasp the subtleties of Venezuela's political history, and to render it available in written form to interested students of politics from other countries and regions of the world.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Diamond, L. J. (2002). Thinking About Hybrid Regimes. *Journal of Democracy*, 13:2, p.23

<sup>2</sup> Corrales, J., & Penfold, M. (2015). *Dragon in the Tropics: Venezuela and the Legacy of Hugo Chavez* (second edition). Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, p.161

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.25

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Levitsky, S., & Way, L. A. (2010). *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*. New York: Cambridge University Press, p.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.5

## Chapter One: Historical Background and Structural Problems

The modern political ideas written in Venezuela's 1830 constitution: Democracy, equality, liberty, etc., seem far-fetched or pretentious, considering the weakness of the Venezuelan State and the precarious state of Venezuelan society at the time. These political and social realities were an impediment to modernity, causing political instability, militarism, and ultimately slow political and economic development. The Governments that ruled the country for more than two hundred years following the declaration of independence, were incapable—despite many advances—of modernizing the country; the current poor majority, weak state and rentier economy serving as proofs of their undeniable failure.

At the time of Columbus arrival to the new world, today's Venezuela was inhabited by primitive societies, whose technological and organizational level paled in comparison to even their Inca, Maya or Aztec neighbors. The Spanish Monarchy ruthlessly forced a new order on its conquered territories that gave them a taste of European civilization: Elaborate secular and religious administrative systems; a special law system and codes;<sup>1</sup> a record number of founded cities and towns,<sup>2</sup> etc. Moreover, all this was done while maintaining a certain sense of order and political stability—in its South American territories—until the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, their long distance from Viceroyalties and General Captaincies, as well as their lack of minerals, gave Venezuelan Provinces a more flexible application of the law than in neighboring areas such as Colombia or Peru, at least until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the Captaincy of Venezuela was created. Enough evidence is available on “personal power,” and “institutional infringement,” getting in the way of applying the law during the colonial period.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the church was never severe in Venezuela compared to other regions of the Empire, “turning a black”<sup>4</sup> eye or making “compromises” for the “sinners.”<sup>5</sup> In 1684, Peruvian Bishop Diegode

Baños y Sotomayor, traveled to the Province of Venezuela and “quickly realized that the situation of the catholic church in Venezuela was very different from the one that ruled Nueva Granada,” convocating a “diocesan synod” to “write synodic constitutions” and try to bring order to the “ecclesiastical chaos.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, “in other Spanish provinces, Universities were founded almost two centuries before” the first Venezuelan University, and the “printing press functioned centuries In advance.”<sup>7</sup>

Once the Spanish political system collapsed due to the independence movements that appeared in the American Provinces after Napoleon’s Invasion of Spain, The Venezuelan Elite failed to replace the old system by another functioning equivalent due to the Independence war, which destroyed the economy and almost halved<sup>8</sup> the population of the country. The chaos of the independence war had created a “nexus”<sup>9</sup> between armed Caudillos and the common people, which fueled the war and extended well beyond the conflict. After the dream of The Great Colombia had succumbed to regional secession movements, the Venezuelan Republic was restored in 1830, under the Oligarchic command of a Military Caudillo and the Venezuelan Spanish-descendant Elite. This Oligarchy tried to transplant European and North American ideas about political organization, Law, and economics to a society presenting severe socioeconomic realities—depopulation, a poor coffee-based economy, lack of internal ways of transportation, widespread poverty and lack of education, etc.—and extremely weak state institutions. After more than 200 years since independence, the distribution of political power, freedom and equality “have not been able to find a satisfying equilibrium.” Moreover, “the parties and political groups have not been able to come together at critical moments of the country’s Republican history, leaving a regrettable balance of political regression through dictatorships, authoritarian governments,” and political idolization.<sup>10</sup>



## The Colonial System

Before being known as Venezuela, the region currently occupied by the South American country was divided into several political units; they were independent from each other, but belonged to the Spanish Monarchy. Parts of the region's territory was first visited by Columbus in 1498, during his third travel, at a time when it was simply called "Tierra Firme," or Mainland, by the Spanish. A Papal Bull in 1493 had granted, within certain limits, insular and mainland territories to be discovered in the New World, or West Indies, to the Catholic Monarchs.<sup>11</sup> Tierra Firme, along with the rest of the kingdom of the West Indies, remained personal property of the Catholic Kings until the end of their lives. In 1516, after Fernando II passed away and his grandson Charles I of Austria came to power, The West Indies were annexed to the Kingdom of Castile.<sup>12</sup> In 1520, Charles I declared Tierra Firme, along with other territories of the West Indies, an indivisible part of the Spanish Crown.<sup>13</sup> Since the second decade of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the word Tierra was replaced by that of "Provinces," a term that became generic to name sizable parts of the Indies during the first half of the century.<sup>14</sup> These provinces were, in turn, under the jurisdiction of a Viceroyalty or a Royal Audience. The provinces that occupied today's Venezuelan territory were either under the jurisdiction of the Viceroyalty of Granada or under that of The Royal Audience of Santo Domingo, depending on the concerned province and time. Moreover, there was a government at the provincial level; two important components of which were its head, or Governor, and the "Cabildo," the municipal branch of government.

The Criollos, or American born Spanish, but particularly the Native American and racially mixed inhabitants of the colonies, were systematically excluded from access to any political office. To govern the Indies, The Monarchy created special bodies, located in Spain, during the early 16<sup>th</sup> century: The House of Trade (1503), which controlled all trade with the

colonies, and the Council of the Indies (1511), the most important administrative body of the colonies, which, under the direction of the King, decided on Executive, Legislative, and Judicial matters. To these two bodies we have to add the bodies created in the Colonies themselves, which were mentioned before, that also exercised many Executive and Judicial functions, such as the Viceroyalties, Governorships, Cabildos, and Royal Audiencias. All of these bodies; however, were staffed and directed by Peninsular Spanish, with only a scarce minority of Criollos occupying any posts at all.<sup>15</sup> More precisely, it was in the Cabildos, where posts could be bought by Criollos, that these got the opportunity to exercise some political power at the city level. This limited participation of Americans in their own governing institutions was the result of a legal system that ranked citizens by their race, assigning different civil and political rights according to different racial categories. At the top of this scale were the Peninsular Spanish, which enjoyed the most rights; then came the Criollos, who were considered second-rate citizens, but that still enjoyed special civil and economic rights. At the bottom of the scale were native Americans, which after being decimated and deprived of their lands, were first enslaved, until the crown abolished their enslavement in 1542, and then suffered the encomienda system, a form of forced labor, which continued to be practiced even after Indian mandatory labor was also abolished in 1549.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Indian rights were precarious during the whole colonial period, superior only to those of the Blacks, who were brought as slaves to the Indies since the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, and who did not get their freedom in Venezuela until 1854, decades after independence was declared.<sup>17</sup>

### The Cabildo

Several factors contributed to The Cabildo turning into the only colonial institution that allowed future-Venezuelan, Criollos to exercise a certain degree of self-government. Historian

Rafael Arráiz gives a good summary of these factors, which are mainly economical and geographical in nature.<sup>18</sup> Firstly, the future Venezuelan provinces were not rich in minerals like Peru and New Spain (Mexico), which made the provinces less important economically for the Monarchy. Viceroyalties were established nearby those two important mineral rich areas to administer them more effectively. The remote metropolis could only exercise effective power in its Colonies through the Viceroyalties, but these were distant from Venezuelan provinces, allowing the latter a greater degree of autonomy. Moreover, and unlike other areas in America, such as the ones already mentioned, the Conquistadors did not find complex urban structures, or advanced cultures in Venezuela's current territory, which made the conquest of the territory less resource consuming, and contributed to the establishment of a weaker regulating political structure that granted a higher degree of autonomy to its inhabitants.

Secondly, due to the great geographical distance from the metropolis, as well as economic reasons, Royal Decrees were issued that allowed Criollos to occupy positions of power in the Cabildos. The law of 1560, permitting certain authorities from The Cabildo to replace the Governor of a Province in cases of absolute absence, was a reaction of the Monarchy against delays in the appointment of these important government figures.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, a royal decree from 1565 "established that to be Mayor or Councilor in The Cabildos [priority should be given] to the first conquistadors and their descendants."<sup>20</sup> In addition, since 1591, several Cabildo offices were available for purchase, as this money was useful for the often depleted, Empire's coffers.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, Arráiz points out that during the Austria's reign, and particularly under Charles II (1664-1700), the monarchy suffered from severe crises that included "military defeats, famine, empty coffers." This led "the control that should have been exercised over the American provinces to be minimal."<sup>22</sup> As a result, a new class of "Criollos," with economic and political

power, formed around the Cabildos in the Venezuelan Provinces. Arraiz reminds us that External and Internal threats solidified this identity even more.<sup>23</sup> Being a Criollo was not the same as being a Peninsular, and the Spanish discriminatory law constantly reminded subjects of this reality. Abuses committed by Peninsulars occupying high political posts such as that of Province Governor, strengthened a separate Criollo identity; external threats of Corsairs and Pirates acted in much the same way. When the Monarchy Crisis arrived, it was the Criollos, concerned about their economic and political interests, who pushed for an independent Republic to be established.

### The Bourbon Reforms

In 1700 dies Charles II of Austria. He had left no heirs, and his testament favored Phillippe of Anjou for the throne. Phillippe V of Bourbon became King of Spain and Indies in 1700, starting the reign of the Bourbon Dynasty in Spain. During the Bourbons, centralizing reforms were carried out in the Empire. This concentration of power, which intensified particularly during the reign of Charles III (1759-1788), resulted in a loss of functions by the Cabildo and an increase in taxes; two policies that affected Criollos directly. Now that mineral resources were depleted, agriculture became the most profitable business in the Indies. Agricultural exports such as coffee and cocoa flourished in some of the Venezuelan Provinces. To tax and control this booming economy, several provinces were unified under The Captaincy General of Venezuela (1777), a direct predecessor of today's Venezuela. The Captaincy was in fact just one more step towards the unification of the provinces, which took place between 1776 and 1793. The following are the institutions created to unify the Provinces: Army Quartermaster (1776), charged with commerce, taxation and military-economical management in all of the provinces; The Captaincy General (1777), which subordinated the other provinces in military matters; The Royal Audience (1786),

which took charge of judicial government for all provinces; And lastly, The Consulate of Caracas (1793), which took over commercial law in the Venezuelan provinces.<sup>24</sup>

Another important event for the lives of Criollos in the Provinces during the Bourbon Reign was the arrival of the Guipuzcoana Company (1728). King Charles V created it through a Royal Decree to accomplish two main functions: Fight contraband and monopolize the cocoa trade between South America's Caribbean coast and the Peninsula.<sup>25</sup> Leather and Tobacco had been the main exported commodities of the Venezuelan Provinces until the late XVII century, but since that time, leather exports fell, and Cocoa exports increased, becoming the most important commodity during the XVIII century.<sup>26</sup> The Criollos despised the Company, which set low prices for Cocoa. Moreover, The Company fought contraband, which allowed Criollos to sell agricultural products at higher prices than those paid by the Spanish Monarchy. Trade regulation of the Guipuzcoana, which affected Criollos' economic interests—along with the unification of the provinces into The Captaincy General of Venezuela—solidified the Criollos as a social class, and contributed to the creation of a regional identity.

### Foreign Ideas and Local Rebellions

Parallel to the unification of The Venezuelan Provinces, revolutionary ideas from Europe and The United States arrived to the new Captaincy General. For example, copies of The Philadelphia Declaration of Colonial Rights (1774) were available in Caracas in 1777.<sup>27</sup> The presence of a well-educated elite in this and other Provincial cities, allowed for the new ideas to be absorbed by, and have an impact on the colonial society. Foreign Visitors such as Humboldt, Ségur or Daune positively remarked 'the political and literary culture of Caracas's 'Intellectuals.'<sup>28</sup> Venezuelan translator, Manuel Garcia Sena, "translated Common Sense and other Thomas Paine works, as well as the American Constitutions," which all contributed to the

“influence of American Republicanism in the conception of the new sovereign state of Venezuela.”<sup>29</sup> The French revolution and the Declaration of The Rights of Man and of The Citizen, had an important impact in the minds of Venezuelans, and not just in the upper classes. Chirinos’ Armed Revolt (1795), led by free Blacks and Indians, sought to implement what Chirinos, a free Black, called ‘the law of the French,’ based on the stories he had heard in Haiti and other places where he had worked, about the French revolution.<sup>30</sup> Chirino’s revolt, however, is not considered by Venezuelan historians as an independence movement, but rather as a poorly organized revolt against “the injustices of slavery” and high taxes.<sup>31</sup>

The new Republican ideas also contributed to invasions and Conspiracies in the Captaincy General, which were accompanied by elaborate documents that proclaimed independency against Spain. The famous Venezuelan revolutionary, Francisco de Miranda, who fought in both the American and French revolutions, led two invasions (1806) of the Venezuelan territory without success. He is considered a “precursor of ideas about independence and political freedoms” in South America, and created elaborate documents to communicate his political convictions: “American Constitution (1798), his constitutional project (1801), and The Proclamation to the Peoples of Colombia (1806).”<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the Conspiracy of Gual and España (1797-1799), was ‘the most organic, complete, and of the most theoretic content for the definition of its goals and ideas,’ of Hispanic America.<sup>33</sup> It offered among its rich normative documentation, a translation of 1793’s French human rights declaration.<sup>34</sup>

### Monarchy Crisis and Declaration of Independence

Napoleon’s invasion of Spain in 1808, and the coronation of his brother Joseph as King of Spain, sparked the creation of several Juntas in the Peninsula, which defended the rights of King Ferdinand VII to the throne, as well as rejected the French takeover. Criollos in Caracas

originally formed a Junta in the image of those in the Peninsula, but the Junta of Sevilla, which demanded Venezuela's obedience to its authority, did not approve of this action. Almost all prominent Criollos of Caracas were put in jail by Peninsular authorities, including members of the Peninsular nobility, who lived in the city.<sup>35</sup> Although they were soon released, this was considered a humiliation by the Criollos, who saw their Peninsular counterparts create Juntas in Spain, without suffering the same consequences. In 1809, The Captaincy recognized the authority of the Supreme Junta in Sevilla, which demanded Venezuelans to choose their representatives for the Junta. However, the Supreme Junta of Sevilla disappeared in 1810 due to Napoleon's advance, and another body, The Supreme Regence Junta—due to the military emergency—replaced it without including any representatives elected directly by the Colonies. On April 19, the Caracas's Cabildo gathered to reject the Regence government, declared that the sovereignty resides in the Cabildo, and created the first Venezuelan Government. The Government, or "Conservative Supreme Junta," recognized Fernand VII as the rightful King, as it did not declare independence until later on. Elections for a Venezuelan congress took place in March of 1811. Members of a revolutionary group, known as The Patriotic Junta, led by Miranda, put street pressure on congress, helping to cause the Declaration of Independence on July 5,<sup>36</sup> the first one of Spanish America.

Since the beginnings of its foundation, the new state was oriented towards a Federal type of Government.<sup>37</sup> After discussions about whether to establish a Centralized or Federal government took place in congress, the latter solution was favored. The matter appeared already formally settled in the Declaration of Independence, which referred to the "American Federation of Venezuela."<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, the Federal constitution of the States of Venezuela was created on December 21 of 1811; 37 deputies representing all states signed it.<sup>39</sup> The constitution formally established in Venezuela the principles of "popular sovereignty, representation, suffrage, division

of powers [and] federation.”<sup>40</sup> The “Rights of the People Law,” already sanctioned by congress in July, was included in the constitution.<sup>41</sup> The human rights developed in the American and French revolutions were incorporated to the Venezuelan law texts through “The Rights of Man and the Citizen,” one of the documents from Gual and España’s conspiracy.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, several articles<sup>43</sup> in the constitution guaranteed the elimination of privileges for particular classes and races, making Mixed, Whites and Indian citizens equal before the law; Although Indians received certain privileges.<sup>44</sup> The slave trade was banned, but existing slaves continued to be so due to economic interests of the Agricultural society.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, the Magna Carta did not allow any other religion other than Catholicism.<sup>46</sup>

The new Republic; however, would soon be involved in a civil war. The Supreme Junta had lost its first military battle in 1810, when it tried to annex Maracaibo and Coro, two Royalist provinces of the Captaincy.<sup>47</sup> At the time, the Supreme Junta was able to stay standing, since the Royalists did not advance towards Caracas, limiting themselves to defending their provinces. The real threat came after the Republic was founded, when in 1812 The Regence decided to send Captain Monte Verde to end the Revolution. He arrived to Venezuela in March of the same year, and quickly started incorporating a considerable number of recruits to his forces. In April, the new Congress, mostly composed of civilians, decided to give absolute governing powers to General Miranda, to confront the situation. This marked the end of what had been a civilian project. From this moment on, the military and Strongmen (Caudillos) controlled the country, well beyond the end of the war. De jure, The First Republic was lost on July 24, when Miranda agreed to capitulate to Monteverde.<sup>48</sup> However, this was only the beginning of a long war between Royalists and Patriots, which did not end until 1823.



## Civil War and Destruction

The independence war was mainly a civil war, until at least 1814,<sup>49</sup> where Venezuelans fought against each other in either camp. The struggle for independence was an Elite movement, of a small minority of the Venezuelan population. Only the elite could fully understand the new Republican ideas written on the political texts available at the time; the rest of the population joined any one side of the conflict according to different reasons.<sup>50</sup> According to writer Laureano Lanz, the majority of the population was on the Royalists side until 1815.<sup>51</sup> A member of the Venezuelan congress said in 1830, that if there had been an election on the matter in 1810, the majority of Venezuelans would have chosen to stay under the Monarchy.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, there were different interests between the Elite and the rest of the population. Many Criollos wanted independence without democracy,<sup>53</sup> and the Republic, when it was founded in 1811, did not, in practice, end with slavery or discrimination.<sup>54</sup> A report of a Royalist at the end of the independence war, names the leaders of the independence movement, all of which belonged to the highest social class.<sup>55</sup> Many Venezuelans doubted whether these wealthy men were really looking after their interests.

The war was particularly brutal between 1812 and 1814. Monteverde, and later Captain Boves, both acting under the name of the crown, but like the Caudillos they were, constantly violating the Law, committed some of the most horrible crimes of the whole independence war.<sup>56</sup> These abuses were due to the complex situation Spain was going through, which had not allowed time for the King to organize and manage Colonial matters.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, by the end of the Venezuelan Independence war (1823), “by far the longest and bloodiest of the continent,”<sup>58</sup> the country was devastated. The population was reduced by 44%<sup>59</sup> during the conflict, which Simon Bolivar said, “disappeared the work of three centuries of Industry, culture, and illustration.”<sup>60</sup> The

Provinces, which were relatively rich before the war, suffered a destructive impact on their economy and civilian elite, which almost disappeared.<sup>61</sup> Psychologist Ana Teresa sums up the cost of the war by saying that “no other nation would come out devastated [from the war] . . . as did Venezuela. Differently from what happened to other Republics, [Venezuela] lost his population, his productive resources and its elite; in counterpart it was filled by heroes.”<sup>62</sup>

### Caudillismo

The war brought with it a regrettable consequence for the future of the country. Since then, Caudillismo and its twin brother, militarism, with the exception of a long democratic period (1959-1998), became dominant players of Venezuela’s political history. With the war, according to Historian Iturrieta, a new political system was born, called ‘despotic caudillismo,’ where hegemonies formed around an individual, or caudillo, “sustained by the exercise of terror and on particular treatments, of a purely circumstantial origin.”<sup>63</sup> The fall of the Republic in 1812 created a “nexus between a man of arms and the common people for the exclusive monopoly of the government.”<sup>64</sup> When Monteverde arrived from Spain and reconquered the territory, he did not reestablished the Monarchical system, but instead became a despot or caudillo, without parallel in the colonial period.<sup>65</sup> In 1814, Jose Boves, another Royalist that got involved in the war in 1812, ignored Spanish institutions and “proclaimed himself Governor and General, in the name of the King.”<sup>66</sup> Under the command of these and other lawless caudillos, the common people, who had lost their identity as the Monarchical system collapsed, joined the war, trying to find a direction in the middle of the chaos. Resentment, created by centuries of injustices under the colonial period, was exploited by Caudillos in both sides of the war, who utilized it to enlarge their armies. As an illustration, General Boves “adulated colored people,” who followed him as an “idol” in his quest for “destroying the dominant class.”<sup>67</sup>

A collapsed system, where institutions had become ineffective, allowed other types of caudillos to surface, soon after Monteverde's arrival, this time to fight against the Royalists. Many llaneros, or Cowboys, who were accustomed to the harsh toil in the great Venezuelan Hatos (extensive farms), either joined the war as soldiers, or in the case of General Jose Antonio Paez, became powerful Caudillos. Hato owners such as The Monagas Brothers or Santiago Mariño, and Aristocrats such as Simon Bolivar, also became important Military-Caudillos, who supported by their troops and military achievements, dominated the political landscape. Iturrieta says that due to the collapse of the political and economic system, caused by the war and Monteverde's abuse, it became impossible to "impose order in society," and this is how certain sectors, such as the one of llaneros, previously occupied in their farm work, became engaged in the war.<sup>68</sup> Ana Torres points out that many people joined the Caudillos in search for personal gain,<sup>69</sup> or merely to protect themselves from pillage.<sup>70</sup> She explains that armed men dominated society once the Monarchy disappeared, and that during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, "politics was war."<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, Historian Picon Salas argues that once the order of the colonial society collapsed, the only remaining coordinating force was the military.<sup>72</sup> As mentioned at the beginning of this section, this military dominance, led by powerful Caudillos who saw themselves as above the law, remained a reality for the rest of the century, and a good part of the next, resurfacing in the current century in politicians such as Hugo Chavez or Nicolas Maduro.

### End of Independence War, and the Great Colombia

After losing the Republic two times to the Royalists (1812 and 1814), the Patriots were finally able to establish and maintain a Venezuelan Republic, declared in 1817. At the time, the new nation still had important parts of its territory occupied by the Spanish, but it would never be lost again. In 1819; however, the country became a department of a new Colombia, created by the

Congress of Angostura on December 17. The new country, also known as the Great Colombia, was ratified in 1821 by The Cucuta Congress, and lasted until 1830, when its members, Today's Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, and Ecuador, as well as parts of today's Brazil, Peru, and Guyana, separated from the union. Venezuelan Generals, including Simon Bolivar, the leader of the liberation movement, played a major role in liberating the previously mentioned territories, including today's Peru and Bolivia. In 1821 Venezuela won its decisive battle, the Battle of Carabobo, short after King Fernand VII was forced to accept the Cadiz constitution by his military (1820), preventing a big expeditionary force from departing to South America, where it was meant to provide urgently needed reinforcements to the Royalist army; As a result, General Morillo, stationed in Venezuela, was deprived of the means to win the war. Although the war continued, the Royalists were incapable of stopping the Revolutionaries. The last Venezuelan battle took place in 1823, in Lake Maracaibo.

From 1819 until 1830, Venezuela was a department of Colombia. The vast new nation was Created by the congress of Angostura (1819), and ratified by the one in Cucuta (1821). A new constitution created in Cucuta during the ratification, replaced the previous one from Angostura. Both these constitutions were Centralist, as opposed to federalist, to the pleasure of Simon Bolivar, who held a strong tendency towards centralism throughout his life. He argued that the first Republic was lost due to the Federalist nature of its constitution, which made the government show "criminal clemency [to enemies], that contributed more than anything else, to topple the machine," which the revolutionaries had not "entirely concluded."<sup>73</sup> Rather than a consequence of the political system in place; however, the end of the first Republic was more likely the cause of errors committed by the revolutionaries and their maximum military leader, General Miranda, who had received absolute powers from congress to defend the country from the Royalists. Luccas sees in all of the three most emblematic documents of the Liberator,<sup>74</sup> "the

leit motive of Bolivar,” or “the necessity of a strong and unanimous man that would bring order, a task for which he obviously felt a calling.”<sup>75</sup>

Since the very beginning, Bolivar’s project of a Colombian union had its Venezuelan opponents. The municipality of Caracas approved the Cucuta constitution with certain reserves regarding insufficient Venezuelan representation in the congress that approved it, and the Incompatibility of certain laws with Venezuela’s needs.<sup>76</sup> Bolivar’s Centralism also became more controversial as it became more evident. In 1825, he founded the Republic of Bolivia, creating a constitution that made the Liberator permanent (for life) President of this country.<sup>77</sup> Not satisfied with this, Bolivar proposed this same undemocratic constitution for Colombia, leading Colombian Vice President Santander to express his categorical disapproval in a letter to the Liberator.<sup>78</sup> Santander, on the other hand, had a worsening relationship with General Paez, head of the Venezuelan Department. An incident in 1825 drove Bogota, seat of the Colombian Government, to remove General Paez from his post as General of Venezuela. However, the municipality of Valencia, distraught by the insult against the Venezuelan independence hero, decided to reestablish Paez to his post, and made him swear not to obey orders from the Capital.<sup>79</sup> Bolivar had to travel to Venezuela to prevent a separation from the Union, but had to recognize the leadership of Paez in the country,<sup>80</sup> which showed how powerless the central government was in applying his law in the Department.

Faced with the reality of widespread dissatisfaction with the status quo, Bolivar decided to have a “Convention” (April 1828) in Ocaña, Colombia, to reform the constitution, and decide on the divisive debate between Federalism and Centralism. Proponents of both systems were unable to arrive at an agreement, prompting a group of “radicals” to appoint Bolivar Dictator on June 13. On August 27, The Liberator wrote a Decree that, to avoid “anarchism . . . establish interior peace, and make the necessary reforms” in the country, singlehandedly did away with

Cucuta's constitution, and declared Simon Bolivar "President Liberator" of Colombia.<sup>81</sup> The President Liberator convened assemblies in 1829, throughout the Colombian territory, where a majority expressed themselves against him and the Colombian Union. Disillusioned, and after having considered establishing a monarchy,<sup>82</sup> with himself as the king, Bolivar decided to resign as President of Colombia on January 15, 1830, in front of a constituent congress he had convened for January 2.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, by the mandate of Valencia's Assembly, Paez is appointed Venezuela's head of state. Willing to separate from Colombia, he calls for a Constitutional Congress to be established on May 1830.<sup>84</sup> The Venezuelan Republic is reestablished on September 22,<sup>85</sup> to remain independent until this day.

Colombia was probably an impossible dream in such a vast territory, controlled by elites with dramatically different interests and identities. The author of this dream had liberated five countries, but, in the words of Ana Torres, "leaving prosperous and institutionalized Republics was too far from the reality that himself, shortly before dying, saw with all clarity." Some opinions of the Liberator, expressed in a letter to a friend on November 9, little more than a month before his death, shows how negatively his hopes were for the future of the newly liberated countries: among other things, Bolivar told his friend Juan Jose Flores that "America" [was] "ungovernable," whoever served a revolution "plowed on the sea," [and] that the "only thing that could be done in America was to emigrate" ..., because the country would fall "infallibly" in the hands of the "unbridled populace" first, and on those of "almost imperceptible tyrants of all colors and races" afterwards.<sup>86</sup>

### Conservative and Liberal Oligarchies

From 1830 until 1858, Venezuela was governed by what some historians refer to as the Conservative and Liberal Oligarchies. The conservative oligarchy (1830-1846) established a

liberal constitution that was harder to apply in practice as both economic and political power were concentrated in a few hands—a characteristic that was shared by all governments during the whole 19<sup>th</sup> century and most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Governments during this Conservative period; however, granted some civil and political freedom. There was freedom of speech, including freedom of the press. Moreover, alternation in power through elections and the principle of separation of powers was also maintained. Similarly, the Liberal Oligarchy (1847-1858) created a liberal constitution and practiced a liberalism similar to its conservative predecessors, going as far as abolishing slavery in 1854. However, it was marked by nepotism and indefinite continuism.

Military Caudillos<sup>87</sup> and members of the Venezuelan Bourgeoisie constituted both Oligarchies. Nevertheless, the class engaged in commerce was more influential during the Conservative period, whereas Landowners were more favored during the Liberal Oligarchy. The oligarchical nature of the governments, worsened by the income-based electoral system, prevented the common people from participating in politics, rendering them incapable of improving their impoverished situation, and making them ideal prospects for joining rebel caudillo armies.

At the outset of the Republican restoration, in 1830, Venezuela had been suffering from numerous structural problems that made it all the more difficult for governors to create a stable political system and set the country in a path of prosperity. The country's economy, still recovering from the recent devastation of the long independence war, and the new independent status of the nation, which meant the destruction of the Monarchical system and the creation of a power vacuum in the country, were two main factors that increased the difficulty of maintaining stability in government. The Conservative Oligarchy tried to apply modern ideas of government and economics in a fundamentally primitive society—even in relation to its Latin American neighbors—marked by depopulation, anarchy, a weak coffee-based economy, widespread

ignorance, and a severe lack of internal ways of communication, among other impediments to modernity. These structural factors, all of which remained unchanged during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, made governments particularly susceptible to armed rebellion and revolutions, led by Caudillos coming from the four corners of the country. As a result, Military Caudillos led all governments that were able to get to office or stayed in power for any significant period of time during the century.

### Conservative Oligarchy (1830-1846): Liberalism and Repression

The second strictly Venezuelan Constitution was born in 1830, preceded by two Colombian constitutions, meant for a wider area that comprised, but was not limited to, Venezuela, and by the first constitution of Venezuela proclaimed in 1811, shortly after the declaration of independence. The second constitution (1830) was created once Colombia broke apart, and the Venezuelan Republic was restored. The new Magna Carta, in contrast to its Colombian predecessors, was not centralist, but rather struck a balance between Federalism and Centralism. It recognized the autonomy of municipalities, while creating a central government “impulse.”<sup>88</sup> It also declared the principle of separation of powers, alternation, representation through elections, and limited presidential terms to four years, without allowing immediate reelection.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, the document denied privileges to the military and to any particular religion. On the other hand, the people elected Presidents indirectly. The Electoral College that elected the President was itself elected through a selective income-based system, which disenfranchised the majority of the population. Moreover, new laws were made to protect private property and to ensure fair treatment of individuals going through the judicial system, including penalties for arbitrary detentions,<sup>90</sup> and regulations to improve living conditions of prisoners.<sup>91</sup> On the economic domain, the liberalization of interest rates, the improvement of fiscal collection,



and the elimination of the church tithe paid by farmers, improved the difficult economic situation during the first Conservative government.<sup>92</sup>

Paez respected alternation of power, even when his candidate of choice did not win the elections, which was the case when the Bourgeoisie decided to support Jose Maria Vargas' candidacy in 1835.<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, by not forcing his will on who was elected President, Paez showed respect for the separation of power principle, staying in charge of the military but not intervening in the executive branch when he was not President.<sup>94</sup> Moreover, there was freedom of expression during the Conservative period. A highly critical opposition newspaper of the epoch, called "El Venezolano," was "maybe the most influential medium of communication on Venezuela's course of history."<sup>95</sup> The newspaper played an important role in consolidating the Liberal party, which exercised a harsh and vocal opposition against conservative governments, but that was "tolerated" by Paez, "giving an example of respect for public freedom."<sup>96</sup> Nevertheless, Paez and the President in office, Soublette, violently repressed Liberals when these decided to start a rebellion (1846), after so many years of being in the opposition and having then become an important political party, but feeling isolated in an unfair system led by a Conservative hegemony.<sup>97</sup>

### Military and Bourgeois Oligarchy

The Republic of 1830 was the result of an alliance between a powerful military Caudillo (Paez) and the local commercial and landowning bourgeoisie. Paez restored properties to old landowners who had lost them due to the independence war, and became a big landowner himself right after the conflict.<sup>98</sup> According to Battaglini, the old colonial Spanish oligarchy disappeared, but was replaced by a Venezuelan equivalent.<sup>99</sup> Furthermore, Iturriata says that Paez founded the new Republic, in conjunction with an oligarchy that, for the most part, was not present during the

independence process, but returned once it had ended.<sup>100</sup> The Historian mentions “The Economic Society of Friends,” where the Venezuelan elite had gathered before restoring the Republic, to discuss about the difficult economic situation of the country—then under the Colombian Union. This elite joined Paez in creating the new Republic, trusting that the powerful Caudillo would protect their interests.<sup>101</sup> Moreover, these types of alliances of Military and Economic Oligarchies dominated Venezuela during the whole 19<sup>th</sup> century. Iturrieta says that the establishment of “strong governments” and the first “civil conflicts,” can be “adjudicated” to that only “sector,” or Oligarchy, which controlled the country since the separation from Colombia.<sup>102</sup>

Due to their neglect by the governing elite, Battaglini points out that the common people did not see a significant improvement in their quality of life after 1830, compared with that during the colonial period: Slavery remained active for the first 24 years of the Republic; Land ownership continued to be a privilege of the few; “social exclusion and the system of casts continued operating” through the income-based constitutional system, which established different ‘types of citizenship;’ and lastly, the commodities-based, economic model—“with all of its dependency load”—remained a harsh reality.<sup>103</sup> The political instability and the many armed social conflicts of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including the subsequent Federal War (1859-1863), were not just a consequence of inter-oligarchic disputes, but were also due to the colonial-old conflict between the pauperized common people and the political and economic elite.<sup>104</sup> Manifestly, as Iturrieta argues, the founding elite of 1830 wanted to make fortune without the common people or an autocrat getting in their way.<sup>105</sup> Consequently, in Betancourt words, this “suicidal myopia” of the elite, which “felt satisfied with maneuvering behind military presidents,”—to satisfy their own interests—ended up creating a “vengeful hatred in the popular sector, to whom social justice and intervention in political life were negated.”<sup>106</sup> Furthermore, this hatred not only led the people to participate in armed conflicts spearheaded by caudillos during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such as

the long Federal War, but has stayed in Venezuelan society until this day as the situation of a majority of citizens remains relatively miserable, driving support for anti-system causes such as XXI's century Socialism, or authoritarian Strongmen such as Hugo Chavez.

Even though the economic elite exercised considerable political power, they ultimately depended on Military Generals to be able to maintain a modicum of stability in a system constantly sieged by rebel caudillos. Therefore, Military Caudillos dominated over governments and the economic elite, which was forced to “maneuver behind”<sup>107</sup> their “military wing”.<sup>108</sup> For this reason and for his proven military expertise, General Paez exercised a hegemony during the long conservative period. When the economic elite supported a civilian—Dr. Jose Maria Vargas—to become President in 1835, Paez and his candidate of choice, General Soublette, assumed their electoral defeat. However, Vargas was overthrown on his first year as President by rebel Caudillos—including Independence heroes Santiago Marino and Jose Tadeo Monagas—proving his inability to hold power, even with the support of the economic elite.<sup>109</sup> Paez defeated the caudillos and restored Vargas to the Presidency the same year of the coup, but the Doctor, who, according to Arraiz, realized he could not impose his “criteria” over a man that had become a “sort of absolute referee of the Republic,”<sup>110</sup> decided to resign in April 1836.

Being under the tutelage of a Military Caudillo was not the only weakness of the economic elite during the Conservative and Liberal oligarchies. The oligarchy divided into two groups over the application of an 1834 law, which eventually meant the confiscation—by the “usurious oligarchy”—of land from the landed oligarchy, whose members were unable to repay loans after the commodity price bust of 1838.<sup>111</sup> This division was an important factor in the creation of the Liberal party in 1840, which represented the interests of the Landowners.<sup>112</sup> Although as Iturrieta affirms, both Oligarchies shared mostly the same interests: “political control, alternation, selective suffrage, parliamentary usages, the municipal regime, application of

justice, freedom of expression, respect for private property, slavery...,”etc., they fundamentally disagreed on “credit laws.”<sup>113</sup>

### Onslaught of Caudillos

It is important to insist on the constant political instability during the Conservative period, because this is a trademark of the whole 19th century. Not only did Paez have to rescue Vargas’ presidency in 1835 during what was called the “Reforms Revolution,” but also similar rebellions had to be put down by the Caudillo during 1836, 1837 and 1838.<sup>114</sup> In the last year, the traditional government policy of leniency towards rebels changed, condemning rebellion head Coronel Farias to execution.<sup>115</sup> Caudillos seemed to notice the new message sent by the government of President Soublette, and between 1839 and 1843, Venezuela enjoyed a rare period of “complete and constant peace.”<sup>116</sup> In 1846; however, followers of Liberal presidential candidate Antonio L. Guzman, started a rebellion when the economic elite stopped supporting their Liberal leader. President Soublette relied on Paez and Jose Tadeo Monagas to defeat the rebels—led by Francisco Rangel and Ezequiel Zamora—and ended the rebellion. His role in this conflict earned Mongas legitimacy among the conservatives, and Paez supported his arrival to the Presidency in 1846.

### Liberal Oligarchy (1847-1858)

Jose Tadeo Monagas arrived to power supported by the conservatives, against whom he had fought during the Reforms Revolution some years earlier, and for whom he did not have a strong sympathy.<sup>117</sup> Nevertheless, the Conservatives preferred Monagas over the Liberal party, which—“desperate”<sup>118</sup> to get to power after so many years of Conservative rule—were thought capable of igniting the “belligerence”<sup>119</sup> of the common people, if a change of government like the one represented by Monagas did not take place. Moreover, Monagas and his followers had

been exercising an “unbearable pressure” on the Conservatives to receive the reigns of the country, of which the Eastern caudillos led by Monagas considered themselves “legitimate creditors,”<sup>120</sup> having played a heroic role in the independence war. The new Military Caudillo in power decided to ally himself with the Liberal party—shortly after assuming office—marking his distance against Paez and the conservatives. As a result, the government now “functioned” to favor more the interests of the Landed Oligarchy, and less so those of the Commercial Elite.<sup>121</sup> Moreover, even though governments during the Liberal Oligarchy were similarly liberal to their Conservative predecessors, abolishing slavery in 1854,<sup>122</sup> the period was marked by “personalism,”<sup>123</sup> nepotism, and the strong power ambitions of Jose Tadeo Monagas.

After defeating Paez, who rebelled against his government in 1848, Tadeo Monagas became the country’s “absolute” leader, and the conservatives were “estranged” from “public administration.”<sup>124</sup> The General and his brother Gregorio Monagas proceeded to rule the country until 1858, when Tadeo’s modification of the constitution to stay in power backfired. The General not only extended his term from four to six years and eliminated restrictions to reelection, but also personally appointed the legislators who approved the new constitution in 1857.<sup>125</sup> As mentioned earlier in this work, constitutional modifications to amplify reelection possibilities was a common practice of Venezuelan presidents during the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Chavez resuscitated this practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Monagas’s power ambitions and autocratic rule produced a strong reaction from conservatives and liberals alike, who united under the command of General Julian Castro and forced a swift resignation of Monagas in 1858.<sup>126</sup> Julian Castro later sidelined the liberals from the alliance, exiling several liberal leaders from the country, and created the “first democratic constitution”<sup>127</sup> of Venezuela in 1858. The Magna Carta “instituted” direct voting for Presidents, Vice-presidents, Governors and Deputies, while bringing back the Presidential period to 4 years and eliminating immediate reelection.

Moreover, it also took measures to fight against nepotism, by prohibiting family members to replace each other in the Presidency.<sup>128</sup>

## Structural Impediments to Modernity

Venezuela suffered from a variety of structural problems during the XIX century: Depopulation, lack of internal ways of transportation, a poor economy, widespread poverty, etc., which represented a challenge for the modern Republican project planned by the Venezuelan Oligarchy to become a reality. Although three hundred years of colonial rule had brought some of the marvels of European technology, economic system, and political institutions to the Provinces: large-scale crop trade, cities governed by laws and institutions, manufactured products, etc., the majority of its inhabitants remained poor and uneducated. Furthermore, the independence war had dealt a devastating blow to the country's economy and population. By 1830, the structural problems of the new nation would have easily discouraged any public official.

Since 1830, the economy started to become overly dependent on coffee exports, with all the bad consequences that depending on the price swings of only one crop entails. Crops such as Tabaco and Cotton—important exports during the colonial period—were now minor crops. Something similar happened to Cocoa, which had been the most important crop during the XVIII century. Moreover, the natural dye indigo, which had been produced with “emphasis” in the country, was replaced by “iron prussiate” at around 1830.<sup>129</sup> Thus, coffee became the most important export until it was replaced by oil during the third decade of the XX century.<sup>130</sup> Besides being overly dependent on just one crop, the Venezuelan economy suffered from two other major obstacles: depopulation and lack of roads or proper transportation, both of which slowed down economic development—political causes set aside.

As already mentioned, the independence war had dealt a great blow to the country's population, which calculated at one million in 1807 went down to about 56% of that number by 1820. Furthermore, during the 1830s the population was still 2/3 of what it had been before the independence war.<sup>131</sup> Arraiz says that according to a census made in 1825, the population was 659,000, and that it is "evident" that depopulation was a major problem confronting the Republic at the time. Aware of this problem, the government passed a law in 1837 to allow immigrants to come to the country. Arraiz says that between 1832 and 1859 "some French, Germans, Portuguese, Italians," and Spanish—particularly Canarians—came to the country. This immigration stopped in 1859, due to the Federal War, but restarted "some years later."<sup>132</sup>

The lack of communication between different regions of the country during the 19<sup>th</sup> century inspired Iturrieta to name his book "Pais Archipelago," or "Country Archipelago," because the country resembled islands isolated from each other, rather than unified contiguous territories. Although by 1839 there was a "considerable number" of carriages for transporting both people and loads in the country, this was "almost exclusively a capital phenomenon,"<sup>133</sup> and in "both Caracas and the rest of the territory," the majority remained confined to regions, which had almost no contact with each other.<sup>134</sup> A European visitor explained in 1857 that not existing "railroads... or carriages of any kind", travelers moved by "horse, mule or donkey."<sup>135</sup> Another visitor in 1844, this time a Spanish mathematician, referred to the coastal mountain range as "a fence, apparently destined by nature to stop the quick progress" of the country's industry. The Mathematician goes on to say that if this barrier is not overcome by "man's hand," all work to "disseminate" an "active and laborious population" in the country, would be in vain.<sup>136</sup> In 1831, the interior minister gives a good summary of the severe lack of ways of communication, which stumped economic activity:

Towns that could communicate in two days need fifteen; the farmer works to pay fright [charges], and the driver to buy and kill [draft] beasts; there is no way to introduce from the coast foreign components and machinery, without which our products cannot compete against foreign ones. There are no internal exchanges, [yet] we see that in one Province abounds what is lacking in another one, and this is happening even between neighboring cantons; in one word, the government believes that after the lack of population, no other is in more urgent need of remedy than that of roads.<sup>137</sup>

Technological advances, “even the most elemental and necessary that were common in other latitudes for centuries,” were slow to appear in Venezuela. As an example, it was barely in January 1845 that the first “wheels” were seen moving people and goods from Caracas to the important port of La Guaria. It was clear that “until the fourth decade of the XIX century, when the world had been changed by the influence of the industrial revolution, Venezuelans were [still] deprived” of the most basic form of transportation. Since 1854, the government had been trying to build a railroad, but no contractors were found to execute the work. In 1858, near Port Cabello, a railway of barely 1km in length was built, “over which no railroad”<sup>138</sup> could operate. For almost “three decades a crusade is made for the construction of roads... but the roads are not built.” After “twenty-eight years” of “sermons” about the need to build roads, some carriages and a “Simulation of a Railroad” is all the improvement that can be seen in the sector.<sup>139</sup>

Modernizing the country also meant changing the culture of the majority of Venezuelans, whose costumes and mentality were incompatible with the European production system espoused by the Venezuelan Elite. Normative considerations set aside, Venezuelans were used to living simple lives disconnected from the world around them, a behavior out of sync with the industrious and profit seeking mentality of the European minority. Pal Rosti, in his “memories of a travel to America” talks about the dislike for work he saw in Venezuelan “peons.” They were



happy to find the food they needed in nature, without having to exercise much effort. In case they needed some material good, they could pick out some fruit from a tree and “sell it on the market,” for a return able to get them more than what they needed. After all, being as rich as “Mr. X or Y” was not going to make them “pass a better time” than what they were already having. Rosti complained that it took “much time and great persuasion” to get someone to send his letter to an “only three hour-long” location, even if he offered a considerable sum of money as a reward for the job. Something similar happened with industrial production. Butter—even though “thousands of cows” roamed the prairies—had to be brought from the US or Europe, due to the lack of interest in producing it locally. The “best vegetables and other food products” similarly came “directly from France.”<sup>140</sup> Moreover, “these people” had “no clear idea about time or distances,” preventing the Hungarian traveler from ever knowing the exact time or the distance from one place to the next.<sup>141</sup> Due to the behaviors he observed in Venezuelans, Rusti believed that “industry and agriculture were headed to ruin and [that] the country’s prosperity would keep descending year after year.”<sup>142</sup> Without a doubt, the work culture of the majority seemed to radically differ from that practiced in Europe or the USA, where according to one exaggerated but illustrative account from 1833, “the industrious is discriminated from the unproductive man,” and only “absolute disability is exempted from work.”<sup>143</sup>

### Political Instability and Military Governments

As already mentioned, the declaration of independence brought the end of the Monarchical system, but the subsequent independence war destroyed the Criollos’s attempt at replacing it by a liberal equivalent. Instead, the conflict resulted in the creation of Caudillos or non-professional military leaders, who were the only ones able to exercise political control in the middle of the ensuing anarchy. After the war, the military leaders who had fought for

independence took control of the country, which eventually separated from Colombia in 1830. The state's weakness mixed with the serious socioeconomic and infrastructural problems plaguing the country, brought serious political instability and constant war during the rest of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Having won the war, the liberation heroes gained a certain level of “legitimacy”<sup>144</sup> which made them feel entitled to hold political power. As they had done during the conflict, the liberators established their predominance during the construction of the new Republic, exercising control over governments and imposing their personal and military hegemony over the “traumatic and destructive” 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>145</sup> They became, as Betancourt said, “nuisance and hindrance,”—with their “exorbitant ambitions of personal power—for the normal evolution of the Republic.”<sup>146</sup> Political competition became a matter of war, where rival Caudillos and their armies fought each other in battle.<sup>147</sup> During “the century of war”<sup>148</sup>— which enjoyed only 16 years of “armed and precarious peace”—there were around “forty major revolutions,”<sup>149</sup> and “innumerable” regional and local uprisings.<sup>150</sup>

The dire socioeconomic factors dating back to the colonial period, mixed with the Caudillismo phenomenon created after the collapse of the Monarchical system—itsself caused by the chaos of the independence war—prevented the establishment of a stable political system during the rest of the century. Only strong caudillos were able to hold power for a significant period of time, but their rule was severely compromised as soon as they lost support from other caudillos, who would unite and overthrow governments, installing yet another strong caudillo in power. The ensuing political conflict between Conservatives and Liberals after the overthrow of Tadeo Monagas, drove the country to the Federal War (1859-1863), just a few months after the “first democratic constitution”<sup>151</sup> of the country was proclaimed. This constitution (1858) which established direct voting for several public officials, including the president, for the first time in

Venezuelan history, did not survive the dictatorship of General Paez (1861-1863), established by the Conservative caudillo as an emergency measure to fight against the Liberals. Paez; however, unable to stop their Federal Revolution decided to sign a peace treaty in favor of the Liberals, who under the command of General Falcon, seized control of government.

At the end of the long Federal war, the country's socioeconomic factors had deteriorated further. The more than 367 battles and 2467 minor confrontations caused around two hundred thousand casualties, and left the country's economy in ruins.<sup>152</sup> Moreover, the war destroyed the small progress done by the Conservative Oligarchy to improve the public administration and, more generally, to advance the country. As a positive outcome; however, the war did away with the stratified social system, consolidated the freedom of slaves, and left certain "undisputable" advances in the laws of the Republic.<sup>153</sup>

The arrival of the Federalists to power led to the establishment of a politically liberal, and "extremely" Federal constitution, where the new States of "The United States of Venezuela" had their own president, and the central government was unable to intervene in most state matters including war. The new federal system exacerbated the problem of Caudillismo, forcing Falcon to frequently leave the capital on military campaigns to put down armed conflicts in the different States.<sup>154</sup> As already mentioned, the federalist constitution maintained and extended the liberal spirit of the previous (1958) constitution: Besides allowing a remarkable level of political and administrative decentralization, the new constitution kept direct voting for the President and amplified press freedom. Moreover, the Presidential term was kept at 4 years without immediate reelection being possible, and the death penalty was forbidden, making Venezuela the first country in the world to establish such a measure.<sup>155</sup> A similar liberal spirit is a constant of all Venezuelan constitutions during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the exception of the one created during Tadeo Monaga's Presidency (1857) and those of Guzman Blanco (1874,1881), which were

clearly designed to favor their promoters' hegemony. On the other hand, despite what the constitutions mandated, all the Strong Military Presidents<sup>156</sup> from the XIX century either indirectly appointed their successors or attempted to remain in power indefinitely, letting their personal power ambitions get in the way of establishing a democratic system.

Falcon was overthrown by another coalition of conservatives and liberals led by the eastern Caudillo, and ex-president, Tadeo Monagas, alleging Falcon's ambitions to reform the constitution and remain in power beyond his constitutional term.<sup>157</sup> Monagas's Blue Revolution (1868); however, was soon ended by General Antonio Guzman Blanco's April Revolution (1870), which started an almost twenty-year-long (1870-1890) autocratic hegemony of the Strong Caudillo over Venezuelan politics. Guzman Blanco eliminated secret voting for the president, discouraging Venezuelans, who were harshly repressed<sup>158</sup> by his autocratic system, from publicly opposing the government. The "Civilizing Autocrat"<sup>159</sup> is recognized for having decreed education to be "free and obligatory," and having up to one hundred thousand children enrolled in primary school during his government, which also created 8 schools to form primary school teachers.<sup>160</sup> Blanco is also remembered for modernizing the state by creating, among other things, civil marriage, the first unified Venezuelan currency, and the state budget. He also founded a national press, and provided the country with national symbols, such as a National anthem and a National Pantheon.<sup>161</sup> From an infrastructural point of view, Blanco left many public works such as roads, aqueducts, an amplified railroad system, and several "monumental buildings."<sup>162</sup>

Although Blanco gained support from other Caudillos, who helped him stay in power for a long period of time, he recognized the authority of these Caudillos in their own states, keeping the federal system put in place since 1864, and failing to put an end to the problem of Caudillismo, which caused so much political instability during the century. Moreover, during his hegemony, the general proclaimed two constitutions conceived for maintaining his political

predominance in Venezuela, reducing the presidential term down to a strange two years, eliminating secret voting for the president, and, in 1888's constitution, also ending direct voting for this chief position. At the end of Blancos' period of influence, a civilian, Dr. Rojas Paul, was elected president for the two-year-long constitutional period, giving hopes about a more democratic future without military autocrats running the country. These hopes increased when Dr. Andueza Palacios, another civilian, replaced Rojas in the presidency. General Joaquin Crespo; however, who had rebelled against Rojas presidency without success, triumphed this time in his Legalist Revolution, forcing Andueza's resignation and installing himself as President of Venezuela. The new president adopted a democratic constitution in the spirit of those previous to Blanco's autocratic rule, also allowing press freedom and political opposition during his government (1892—1898). On the other hand, the new President-General, in line with his military predecessors, stubbornly decided to choose his successor at the end of his term, committing fraud against a popular opposition leader to favor the election of General Ignacio Andrade (1898). Andrade; however, was incapable of retaining power after Crespo died soon after his election, and his government was ended in 1899, by General Cipriano Castro and his "Liberal Restorative Revolution".<sup>163</sup>

At the turn of the XX century, the country continued to suffer from caudillismo, and the severe political instability it generated. Moreover, the socioeconomic factors described in this work, despite some small advances particularly during Blanco's rule, continued to plague the country. The economy continued to be based on a single, price-volatile product, and the country depended "for his three daily meals" on foreign food imports. The revenue from the state was based on export-import taxes, and most of them were spent on financing the important foreign debt, caused, among other things, by the expensive Railroad contracts signed during Blanco's presidency.<sup>164</sup> Despite these contracts Venezuela remained "uncommunicated" due to the lack of

“road construction” and “railroads of any importance”.<sup>165</sup> Battaglini rejects the modernizer label given by some historians to Guzman Blanco, and argues that the “ruined economy,” the “unpayable foreign debt,” and the “generalized social poverty” found at the “close of the XX century,” proofs how little governments had done until that point to develop the country, and how much Blancos’s modernization is exaggerated.<sup>166</sup> Moreover, after “a brief” civil-rule period at the end of the century, Venezuela continued to be ruled by “triumphant Generals” well into the XX century. Rafael Caldera said that the positivist thesis about the “necessary Gendarme,” or strong ruler, used by contemporary apologists of Gomez long dictatorship (1908-1935), was proven in practice during the XIX century before being “exposed in theory” during the early XX century.<sup>167</sup> To sum it all up in Battaglini’s words, The “lack of vision” shown by the “bourgeoisie,” the Caudillos dominated by their “ambition and power,” and a society plagued by “great ignorance” kept Venezuela in a state of “backwardness” during all the XIX century.<sup>168</sup>

### Castro and Gomez: The End of Caudillismo

During the rules of Castro (1899-1908) and Gomez (1908-1935), the military was organized and equipped to increase the control over the country’s territory, eliminating the independence of the regional Caudillos.<sup>169</sup> The end of the Caudillo phenomenon allowed these last military caudillos to exercise a previously unknown control over society, effectively repressing all political opposition to their despotic governments. Moreover, the finding of important oil reserves during the second decade of the century, further increased the strength of the new centralized state, and helped Gomez maintain his absolute rule over the country until his death in 1935. Although Gomez made an effort to give an “impression of alternation in power,” permitting others to occupy the Presidency during his rule, these Presidents were personal appointments of the ruler, rubberstamped by an electing congress.<sup>170</sup>

The country's caudillos, who saw their influence reduced by Castros' centralization of power, unified against the government in the "Liberating Revolution" (1903), but were defeated by Castro's forces, led by future president, General Juan Vicente Gomez.<sup>171</sup> Gomez continued to neutralize all remaining caudillos during his government, either by eliminating them or by exiling them from the country.<sup>172</sup> Caudillismo was thus replaced by Militarism, as the country came to be dominated by one Caudillo in command of a powerful professional military. Venezuela continued to be governed by military governments—except for a brief three-year-long period known as the "Triennium"—until the Pact of Punto Fijo was signed in 1958, starting a long democratic era where civilian presidents were able to keep the military in check. With Chavez' arrival to power in 1999; however, the military has become more and more involved in the government of the country, reviving this old militarism that seemed to be overcome during the Punto Fijo system.

### The birth of Oil Dependency

Venezuela's current oil dependency started in Gomez's period, during which oil was found in vast quantities, surpassing coffee as the main export by 1926.<sup>173</sup> The rain of petrodollars first resulting from oil concessions and import tariffs, and subsequently—after oil production had increased—from taxed oil exports,<sup>174</sup> allowed Gomez to maintain an appreciated currency, which decreased agricultural exports by rendering them less competitive and created large and unproductive commercial and service sectors<sup>175</sup> that benefitted from access to cheap foreign currency. Moreover, Venezuelan products became uncompetitive,<sup>176</sup> limiting local industrial production to sectors that were less susceptible to imports such as cement, beer, textiles or cigarettes.<sup>177</sup> Ever since, governments have tried to use the oil rent to modernize the country, and, particularly during the democratic period, to diversify the economy, but they have failed to

change the oil-based economic model despite some advances, rendering the stability of governments and political systems highly susceptible to the volatility of oil prices.

### Gomez's Legacy

Gomez was able to bring peace and stability for the first time since the end of the independence war,<sup>178</sup> but at the cost of political freedom. His repression not only eliminated caudillos but also made people afraid of talking against his government even “inside their homes.”<sup>179</sup> All political parties disappeared during his period,<sup>180</sup> and the constitution was no more than a political instrument of the dictator to help maintain his grip on power.<sup>181</sup> On the other hand, Gomez brought important advances for the country: Venezuela became the world's first oil exporter and its second producer,<sup>182</sup> and the country's foreign debt was paid off; Important advances were made in the codification of laws;<sup>183</sup> and a network of roads was built that improved the country's communication problems;<sup>184</sup> Moreover, oil production created “fortunes” and the internal market was expanded by an incipient middle class,<sup>185</sup> with many people moving to work in the oil fields and finding a better quality of life.

By the end of his rule; however, Venezuela still suffered from precarious primary and university-level education, with a high illiteracy rate of 63%.<sup>186</sup> Venezuela was the “only country in the world” that still had multiple money issuing banks,<sup>187</sup> showing the lack of advancement in just another key area. Moreover, The 5000 km of roads that the country had at the end of his rule, were only a small improvement for a country with 900,000 km of surface.<sup>188</sup> Gomez' government is also known for its corruption,<sup>189</sup> which made the dictator the richest man of the country.<sup>190</sup> Thus, despite the undeniable advances—in Caldera's words— during the long dictatorship Venezuela remained “hermetically closed, with a primitive and simplistic government,



irreducible in its elemental and savage procedures, incapable of synchronizing the country with its time.”<sup>191</sup>

## Lopez and Medina: Transition to Democracy

By the time of Gomez’s death, most sectors of Venezuelan society were dissatisfied with his repressive government, and demanded a more open political system. Already in 1928, a group of university students collectively known as “1928’s generation,” publicly protested against the dictatorship, and ended up jailed or exiled from the country. These students incorporated to political life after the end of Gomez’s government, leading the public outcry for liberalization. The candidate chosen by the military to replace Gomez, General Lopez Contreras, in tune with the country’s wishes, took action to open up the political system. His government liberated political prisoners, granted the return of exiles,<sup>192</sup> and permitted the creation of political organizations<sup>193</sup> that were able to gather ample social support.<sup>194</sup> The old infamous jail “La Rotunda,” so feared by Venezuelans during Castro’s and Gomez’s rule, was finally closed during his government.<sup>195</sup> Moreover, at the beginning of his mandate, a rich public debate took place in congress, where different political views were freely discussed during a period of four months, resulting in a constitutional reform of liberal content. For instance, to prevent Presidents from staying in power indefinitely, the reform prohibited immediate reelection, and reduced the presidential term from seven to five years.<sup>196</sup> Furthermore, the reform granted worker-rights to association and public manifestation.<sup>197</sup> Following municipal elections in January 1937; however, the government reacted against the victory of left leaning opposition candidates by outlawing all leftist parties and exiling forty-seven politicians from the country for a one-year period, alleging their association to the illegal communist party.<sup>198</sup> This action marked the end of Contreras’s liberalization, which was expanded during his successor’s term.

Chosen by Contreras as his successor, General Medina Angarita is elected President in 1941. Medina expanded the liberalization started by Contreras, granting complete freedom of expression and letting political parties operate freely in the country.<sup>199</sup> Furthermore, Worker unions were able to fight for better working conditions, although communist unions were banned and unions could not engage in any kind of political support for opposition parties.<sup>200</sup> This expansion of political freedom benefitted opposition parties, particularly the newly created “Democratic Action,” (AD in its Spanish initials), which was able to strengthen his political support during the period.<sup>201</sup> AD, which fought for the establishment of universal and direct voting for the President, became a key party in bringing democracy to the country for the first time in 1945—during the Triennium— and in finally establishing it in 1958. Moreover, Medina was able to obtain significantly bigger fiscal revenues from international oil companies, by passing a new law in 1943 that increased the taxes on their profits. This law represents an important step towards the country’s gradual control over its own oil industry, by allowing the state to more easily negotiate tax increases in the industry.<sup>202</sup>

## The Triennium

In 1945, Medina’s government is overthrown by a sector of the military discontent, among other things, with their living conditions and the preeminence of older and less educated officials in the highest military ranks. Democratic Action (AD) participated in the coup, as the coup leaders had negotiated AD’s support, in exchange for the party’s control of the resulting government. Although AD did not come up with the military conspiracy against the government of Medina, the organization had harshly criticized the government for failing to institute universal voting, a measure that if applied would have most likely brought AD to power in the upcoming 1946 presidential elections. Romulo Betancourt, founder of AD, became the head of the post-

coup executive junta. During his government, Venezuela transitioned to a democratic system for the first time in its history. A highly liberal constitution instituted Universal voting, dramatically improving political rights for women, who had never been allowed to vote in Presidential elections. The two other parties that reestablished democracy in 1958, URD and COPEI, were both created under Betancourt's government, which guaranteed freedom of expression and other political rights. Betancourt's government; however, is known for being sectarian, sometimes referred as a one-party hegemony, where other parties were not able to participate. AD won elections with such high percentages that other parties felt concerned about their possibility to hold power under such a hegemonic system.

During the Triennium, there were important advances for Venezuelans in education and health. With respect to education, Students attending primary school went from 131,000 in 1945 to 500,000 by the end of the Triennium (1948).<sup>203</sup> Moreover, just to mention another important advance in the matter, schools went from having serious material and infrastructural deficiencies, which made 60% of students to have to take classes "standing up," to becoming fully equipped, including desks for all public schools and laboratories for all public high schools.<sup>204</sup> Public health was also dramatically improved during the period: By the end of Gallegos Presidency, hospitals with a combined capacity of 1600 beds were either built or under construction;<sup>205</sup> Sewers and aqueducts were built to service 460,000 people,<sup>206</sup> and Venezuela became the first Latin American country to rid itself of malaria.<sup>207</sup> Furthermore, Betancourt put particular emphasis on improving working conditions and pay for Venezuelan workers, who were able to improve their quality of life and consumption level.<sup>208</sup> Importantly, the price of gasoline was reduced to a small fraction of what it was during Medina's government, making it one of the cheapest in the world, and remarkably reducing transport prices and associated costs.

From an economic point of view, during the triennium the policy of industrialization through import substitution started to be applied with emphasis. The idea that the state had to play a bigger role in the economy to industrialize the country had been present during the decade of democratic transition, particularly during Medina's government, but the role of the state as the protector and promoter of Venezuelan production did not become a major government policy until the Triennium. Major efforts were made to increase agricultural, livestock and fish production, through the creation of the Venezuelan Corporation of Promotion, or CVG in its Spanish initials. This organization granted loans destined to increase production in a variety of fields. Important advances were made in the production of meat, fish, sugar, and milk, among other products. Moreover, important progress was made in electric production by the installation of several electric plants, which provided half a million Venezuelans with electricity.<sup>209</sup> Furthermore, studies and projects were made to develop iron, steel, and chemical industries, which were not able to materialize as the government was overthrown only three years after being in power, but similar projects were later continued either by the dictatorship (1948-1958) that immediately followed the coup, or by the second government of Romulo Betancourt started in 1959, once democracy had been reestablished.

### Militarism

Despite the political progress it represented for the country, the short democratic period was only possible thanks to the military coup of 1945. It was the military that had the ultimate control over the political system, and it only momentarily delegated this power to AD, until it was reclaimed by its traditional holders in the coup of 1948. Romulo Betancourt, known for his ability to negotiate and keep the military in check during his government (1945-1947), was replaced by Romulo Gallegos in 1947. A distinguished scholar, less known for his political

abilities, Gallegos precipitated the coup of 1948 by having a principled position that prevented him from negotiating his stay in power with the coup plotters. Venezuela was thus replunged into military dictatorship. It would have to wait until 1958 for another democratic system to be implanted. A system that was finally able to reduce the military to their professional role, preventing it from intervening in politics.

### Perez Jimenez' Dictatorship (1952-1958)

After showing signs that they were planning to reestablish a new democratic system,<sup>210</sup> the coup leaders, particularly Perez Jimenez, the most powerful man in the military, decided to commit fraud in the Constitutional Assembly elections of 1952. Perez Jimenez refused to recognize the victory of URD and the second place of COPEI, which left the government party relegated to a third place.<sup>211</sup> Perez Jimenez dictatorship started the same year of the fraud and ended in a coup d'état in 1958. The country succumbed to a political repression only comparable to that of the military dictatorships that governed Venezuela during the first two and half decades of the century. The national police was feared for jailing, torturing and killing political dissidents.<sup>212</sup> Concentration camps comparable to those of Hitler<sup>213</sup> were used to send innocent political leaders, who dared defy the cruel Dictator.

Perez Jimenez arrived to power with the idea of modernizing the country's infrastructure; a job he thought Venezuelan democracy incapable of doing. At the price of freedom and hundreds of human lives, the Dictator supervised the creation of a large number of public works during his mandate. Roads, highways, and airports improved the country's transport infrastructure. Thousands of public Houses and dozens of Hospitals gave better living conditions for Venezuelans. Moreover, the dictator was a pioneer in the development of the petrochemical

and steel industries in Venezuela, and oversaw the construction of the Calabozo Dam, the biggest earthen dam of its time. <sup>214</sup>

## Punto Fijo Democracy

Perez Jimenez Dictatorship arrived to its end on January 23, 1958. The same year, the three most important parties of Venezuela: AD, COPEI, and URD, made the Punto Fijo Pact, according to which a new democratic system was created. The three members of the party promised to recognize and incorporate each other in the government resulting from the upcoming December 6 presidential elections, and agreed on a common government plan that any government, no matter which party won the elections, had to follow. The leader of AD, Romulo Betancourt, resulted elected for the first democratic period (1959-1963). In 1961, after months of debate, a new constitution was created, which was progressive with respect to human rights and liberal from a political point of view, but which also concentrated power in the hands of the central government. The newly created democracy suffered from severe instability during his first government, surviving to twenty coup attempts by the military, and since 1962, having to fight off the new threat of the Venezuelan radical left, which, helped by Fidel Castro, started an armed guerrilla movement against Betancourt's Government. If it were not for the Punto Fijo Pact, Betancourt's government would not have been able to survive the onslaught. Betancourt was finally able to control the military, and, with the help of Raul Leoni (1964-1968), was able to defeat the guerrilla, whose members were pacified and incorporated to normal political life during Rafael Caldera's Government (1969-1973). Caldera had won the elections in 1968, supported by the party he founded, COPEI, making him the first Venezuelan President that received the presidency from another political party (AD), without the need of military force.

By the start of Caldera's Presidency, the democratic system was already stable; free of any radical military or leftist threat. In contrast to the two precedent democratic governments, Caldera was able to exercise power without incorporating other parties to its cabinet, limiting his cooperation with other parties to parliamentary coalitions. His government was replaced by that of Carlos Andres Perez (1974-1978), supported by AD, consolidating in this way a bipartisan or two-party system composed of AD and COPEI, which lasted until 1993. Although considered a "limited democracy" or "corporatists system" where only a few party-controlled vocational groups such as labor or employer unions were able to have an effect on government policies, Punto Fijo's democracy represented a huge advance for Venezuela's political history. The new democracy brought the longest period of freedom and stability the country had ever experienced. Civilian presidents were able to keep the military from intervening in politics, to the point where military coups were no longer thought possible in a democratic system seen as consolidated. Moreover, two political parties alternated each other in power through clean universal elections, similar to the case in western liberal democracies. Finally, the advances in education, health, industrial production, infrastructure, and in any other domain, far surpassed anything the country had ever seen during any other Republican period.

### Collapse of The Rentier Economic Model

Punto Fijo's democracy was based on an economic model characterized by its dependence on oil exports. The stability of oil prices which fluctuated around 2 to \$3 between 1947 and 1973, helped Venezuelan governments maintain a relatively conservative spending level during the period. With the Yom Kippur war; however, and the consequent 1973 OPEP oil embargo, the oil price went from \$3 to \$12 in a few months, creating a boom in oil exporting countries. At the time, President Carlos Andres Perez, taking advantage of the oil boom, carried

out an ambitious and expensive industrialization program, which included the creation of several state-owned enterprises. The inefficiency of these enterprises only worsened government debt, which started to scare the market. Capital flight and credit shortage forced President Luis Herrera Campins (1979-1983) to devalue the bolivar in 1983, and establish currency controls in what is known as Black Friday. The economic model had not survived to price volatility due to the bad administration of the oil boom of 1973. Since Black Friday, the real salary of Venezuelans began decreasing every year and poverty reached alarming levels during the 80s and 90s, creating a political environment that caused the collapse of the Punto Fijo System.

### Collapse of The Punto Fijo Political system

After the collapse of the economic system at the end of 70s, which became evident with the establishment of the first price controls since the 60s in 1983, it became increasingly difficult for the AD and COPEI governments to keep their spending, which had traditionally keep the system afloat. Referred to as a consensual populist system, the Punto Fijo system depended on the oil rent and the strong currency this rent allowed to satisfy different sectors of society and keep their support. Government spending had kept the powerful confederation of Venezuelan workers (CVT) satisfied, and the business sector, united in the employer federation (FEDECAMARAS), enjoyed government subsidies and protection from foreign competition in exchange for their support. Moreover, the appreciated currency (Bolivar) allowed the middle class to have a comfortable level of life at the same time that kept poverty in check by allowing poor Venezuelans to find food and lodging at a relatively low cost. Once Black Friday had taken place, the statist and paternalistic economic model became harder and harder to maintain. When Carlos Andres Perez returned for his second Presidency in 1989, the foreign reserves were inferior to three hundred million dollars. They had been consumed by previous governments on



debt repayment and—due to its reluctance to change the economic model—an expansionary fiscal policy carried out by Lusinchi’s government.

Confronted by a virtual lack of foreign reserves and low oil prices, Perez proceeded to sign a contract with the IMF to receive the funds necessary to restart the economy. This meant a shift towards a market economy without subsidies or tariffs including the increase of gas, electricity, water, and other prices. The announcement of the economic package and the austerity measures created a high level of anxiety in a society already suffering from widespread poverty. Less than a month after Perez arrival to power, a government increase of transport costs not due until March 1, led bus drivers in the city of Guarenas to increase transport prices on February 27 causing protests in the commuter town. The protests turned into riots and spread to major cities in the country, becoming particularly violent in Caracas, where the military had to intervene causing hundreds of deaths before controlling the situation.

The Caracazo, as the riots came to be known, gave a strong blow to the government’s legitimacy. From that moment on almost all sectors of society including the political, intellectual, and a sector of the economic elite, joined a campaign against Perez government and its “neoliberal” policies. Although Perez policies brought growth and reduced inflation during 1991 and 1992, during this last year two coup attempts further damaged the image of the government, and destabilized the political climate. The political class, including Perez’s own AD party, the media, the influential intellectual group known as “the Notables,” and even the economic elite all contributed to the bashing against the government, which decided to end the liberalization program in 1992. Eager to end his unpopular government, the political class unites in condemning Perez for corruption. The congress voted in favor of removing the president from power in May 1992, producing the early culmination of his controversial government.

Besides being heavily criticized by his harsh economic program, Perez had also lost important support from his own party (AD) since the beginning of his government because certain actions of the President resulted in AD losing political power in the country. Besides appointing independent technocrats in key ministries, at the expense of his own party members, Perez carried out an important state reform that allowed Governors and the newly created figure of Mayor, to be directly elected by the people, instead of by the President and the party in power, as it was traditionally done since 1958. AD resented this important loss of power, which allowed other political parties to compete and win governorships, creating regional leaderships that could not be controlled by the party in power. This means that to the radical economic reform that Perez implemented at the beginning of his government, joined the radical decentralizing reform that he promoted, and that changed the centralized nature of the political system to a considerably more decentralized one, with the consequent loss of power this meant for the President and the political party in power. Perez government was not able to handle or survive the monumental changes he carried out in the country; he was touching too many interests at once.

In the 1993 Presidential elections, COPEI founder Rafael Caldera, in a surprising move, decided to compete against his own party, declaring himself an independent, and creating a new party called Convergence. Caldera won the elections with the support of several small anti-system parties, dealing a blow to AD and COPEI, from which the parties would never recover. Caldera had garnered a lot of support before the elections by pronouncing an apologetic speech in congress about the February 4 coup attempt, led by Coronel Hugo Chavez. At the time, public opinion saw the coup attempt as a desperate act of military patriots to rid the country of a corrupt and inefficient government, and not as a condemnable threat to Venezuelan democracy. The 1993 elections votes showed a fragmentation not seen since 1968, indicating the state of instability in the political system. Caldera had won with only 31% of the popular vote. The country was ready

to replace the Punto Fijo political system by something else, but it was not clear what that change was going to look like in 1993. In the 1998 elections, the final blow was given to the political system when the vote polarized between two anti-system options: Hugo Chavez's Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) and Salas Romer's Venezuelan Project. Chavez, who was able to identify himself with the option that disassociated more with the traditional political parties, won the elections taking 56% of the vote.

### The Legacy of Punto Fijo Democracy

Contrary to popular belief, the Dictatorship of Marcos Perez Jimenez was not more beneficial for the country's development than the 1958-1998 democratic period. Although the dictatorship is known for its important public works carried out during the 1948-1958 decade, the legacy of the democratic period far exceeded anything the country had experienced during the previous century and half of Republican life. Rafael Caldera gives a good summary of the major achievements of the democratic period in his Book "De Carabobo a Puntofijo," from which, due to the constraints of this work, I will only cite some of the most striking proofs of substantive progress for Venezuelan society during the four-decade-long period.

To begin with education, in 1961 the illiteracy rate was 34.8% but went down to 9.3% by 1990. During the same base year, there were 1.43 million total students, while there were 6.493 million in 1996.<sup>215</sup> With respect to public health, there were 22 thousand hospital beds in 1960 and 50 thousand by 1998, including public and private establishments. Thanks to the improvement in health care, life expectation ascended to over 70 years and child mortality descended from 55.2 per 1000 in 1950, to 23 per 1000 in 1998.<sup>216</sup> According to the UN, the human development index went from 0.5711 in 1958 to 0.7840 in 1995. As for the development of its industrial potential the Guayana Corporation of Venezuela (CVG), a holding of different

state-owned companies that produce among other things, aluminum, steel, and associated products, exported in 1978 a value equivalent to 5 times the revenue received by Venezuela from oil exports in 1960.<sup>217</sup>

Furthermore, electricity production in the country reached the impressive number of 13,000 megawatts during the period, when different hydroelectric projects were carried out, including the world's 4th largest hydroelectric power station, Guri Dam. Water supply also saw a remarkable increase during the period, going from 20 reservoirs for 2 billion m<sup>3</sup> of water in 1958, to more than 100 reservoirs holding around 200 billion m<sup>3</sup> of water in 1998.<sup>218</sup> It is interesting to point out that even though the decade of dictatorship is known for its construction of important highways, it only left a total of 118km of them built by the end of Perez Jimenez Presidency (1958). By 1998; however, there were 1,640 km of highways, 33,000 Km of asphalted roads, and a total road network of 95,000 Km. Caldera mentions that in a state such as Apure, by the fall of the dictatorship there was not a single Km of road, but by 1998 a road network crisscrossed the whole state.<sup>219</sup> Moreover, to fight the critical housing deficit still affecting an important sector of Venezuelan society today, governments built 2.3 million houses during the period.<sup>220</sup> Public housing was complimented by a vast land reform that distributed 22 million hectares of land among landless farmers.<sup>221</sup> Some of the other works executed during the period include the Maracaibo Lake Bridge, The Angostura Bridge over the Orinoco, the Caracas Metro and its Simon Bolivar International Airport, the big airports in all the main cities, several oil refineries, and the El Tablazo petrochemical complex.

## Notes

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- <sup>3</sup> Iturrieta, E. (2007). *Nada sino un Hombre: Los Orígenes del Personalismo en Venezuela*. Caracas: Editorial Alfa, p.33
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.65
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.63
- <sup>6</sup> Lucca, R. (2013). *Venezuela: 1498-1728 Conquista y urbanización*. Caracas: Editorial Alfa, p.137-138
- <sup>7</sup> Lucca, R. (2009). *Venezuela: 1830 a nuestros días*. Caracas: Editorial Alfa, p.15
- <sup>8</sup> Torres, A. (2009). *La Herencia de la tribu: del mito de la independencia a la revolución bolivariana*. Caracas: Editorial Alfa, p.26-27
- <sup>9</sup> Iturrieta, E. (2007). *Nada sino un Hombre: Los Orígenes del Personalismo en Venezuela*. Caracas: Editorial Alfa, p.50
- <sup>10</sup> Rovira, J. (2008). *De la Monarquía de España a la República de Venezuela*. Caracas: Editorial Torino, p.273-274
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.52
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., p.63
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.64
- <sup>15</sup> Rovira, J. (2008). *De la Monarquía de España a la República de Venezuela*. Caracas: Editorial Torino, p.65
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- <sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.67
- <sup>18</sup> Lucca, R. (2011). *Venezuela: 1728-1830 Guipuzcoana e Independencia*. Caracas: Editorial Alfa, p.15-16
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- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.284
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.422
- <sup>30</sup> Lucca, R. (2011). *Venezuela: 1728-1830 Guipuzcoana e Independencia*. Caracas: Editorial Alfa, p.74
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid p75
- <sup>32</sup> Rovira, J. (2008). *De la Monarquía de España a la República de Venezuela*. Caracas: Editorial Torino, p.204
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., p.166
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., p.174
- <sup>35</sup> Lucca, R. (2011). *Venezuela: 1728-1830 Guipuzcoana e Independencia*. Caracas: Editorial Alfa, p.86
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- <sup>37</sup> Rovira, J. (2008). De la Monarquía de España a la República de Venezuela. Caracas: Editorial Torino, p.228
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- <sup>39</sup> Ibid., p.240
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., p.241
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., p.248
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., p.249
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid., p.250
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid., p.252
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid., p.241
- <sup>47</sup> Lucca, R. (2011). Venezuela: 1728-1830 Guipuzcoana e Independencia. Caracas: Editorial Alfa, p.92
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- <sup>52</sup> Rovira, J. (2008). De la Monarquía de España a la República de Venezuela. Caracas: Editorial Torino, p.233
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- <sup>72</sup> Ibid., p.41-42
- <sup>73</sup> L8 Iturrieta, E. (2007). Nada sino un Hombre: Los Orígenes del Personalismo en Venezuela. Caracas: Editorial Alfa, p.74

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- <sup>74</sup> The ‘Manifest of Cartagena,’ the ‘Speech in front of Angostura’s Congress,’ and the ‘Letter of Jamaica.’
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- <sup>76</sup> Ibid., P177
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- <sup>82</sup> Ibid., p.196
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- <sup>84</sup> Ibid., p.198
- <sup>85</sup> Ibid., p.200
- <sup>86</sup> Torres, A. (2009). *La Herencia de la tribu: del mito de la independencia a la revolucion bolivariana*. Caracas: Editorial Alfa, p.30
- <sup>87</sup> Military Caudillos are Strongmen, who wield considerable military or political power, or both.
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- <sup>89</sup> Ibid.
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- <sup>92</sup> Lucca, R. (2009). *Venezuela: 1830 a nuestros días*. Caracas: Editorial Alfa, p.30
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- <sup>94</sup> Ibid., p.33
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- <sup>97</sup> Ibid., p.42-43
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- <sup>100</sup> Iturrieta, E. (2007). *Nada sino un Hombre: Los Orígenes del Personalismo en Venezuela*. Caracas: Editorial Alfa, p.333
- <sup>101</sup> Ibid., p.280
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- <sup>115</sup> Ibid., p.36
- <sup>116</sup> Lucca, R. (2009). *Colonia y República: ensayos de aproximación*. Caracas. Caracas: Editorial Alfa, p.92

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- <sup>128</sup> Ibid.
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- <sup>130</sup> Ibid., p.30
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- <sup>132</sup> Lucca, R. (2009). *Venezuela: 1830 a nuestros días*. Caracas: Editorial Alfa, p.29
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- <sup>134</sup> Ibid., p.229
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- <sup>139</sup> Ibid., p.230
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## Chapter 2: Chavismo

### Chavez's Regime

With the arrival of Chavez to power, Venezuela's political system gradually changed from an electoral democracy to an "electoral authoritarian"<sup>1</sup> regime, or "electoral autocracy," as Corrales and Penfold argue in their work.<sup>2</sup> Both of these can be considered hybrid regimes, distinguished by containing a mixture of "democratic and authoritarian elements."<sup>3</sup> The electoral democracy that preceded Chavez's regime, known as Punto Fijo democracy, neglected important sectors of Venezuelan society; particularly the poor majority. For this reason, this work supports the term "limited pluralist polyarchy," used by McCoy and Myers<sup>4</sup> to define the four-decade long system. Following Huntington's example,<sup>5</sup> Polyarchy and democracy are understood to be equivalent terms for the purposes of this work. This is done even though Dahl's concept of polyarchy originally tries to more accurately characterize real-world, highly contested and inclusive regimes, none of which can be considered democracies in the ideal sense of the word.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, a democracy or polyarchy, according to Huntington's procedural definition, is understood by the researcher to be a system where "the most powerful collective decision makers are selected through fair, honest, and periodic elections in which candidates freely compete for votes and in which virtually all the adult population is eligible to vote."<sup>7</sup> Moreover, this work also supports complementing Huntington's procedural definition with the requirement—implied in the definition, but nonetheless useful to emphasize—"of a reasonably level playing field between incumbents and opposition," as done by Levitsky and Way in their work.<sup>8</sup>

Chavez's regime did not guarantee enough freedom and fairness in elections to be considered a democracy. The playing field was so uneven in favor of the Government, that the

regime can be considered an electoral autocracy. Furthermore, there are at least two types of electoral autocracies: competitive and hegemonic. Whereas in competitive autocracies the opposition has a chance to win elections (if they gather enough popular support), in electoral Hegemonic systems elections are little more than a façade, and “there is no uncertainty about their outcome.”<sup>9</sup> Considering this and agreeing with Corrales and Penfold, the author believes that Chavez’s regime can be more precisely categorized as a competitive-authoritarian regime. As indicated by the same authors; however, the current government of Nicolas Maduro has turned more authoritarian as it loses popular support, raising fears that the regime could shift to a purer form of Autocracy. Although it is too early to tell, the upcoming December 6 elections are key to answer this question. According to polls, the opposition is headed for a victory. If the government does not accept the results, or if it commits massive fraud, it would be turning into a hegemonic or even dictatorial system, with serious consequences for Venezuela’s society.

### Concentration of Power

Chavez arrived to power with the idea of reforming the constitution, proposing to call a Constituent Assembly charged with executing the task. The constitution in force at the time (1961’s constitution) required a two-thirds vote approval from congress to reform the constitution, or to call a Constituent Assembly. The government; however, with just 44 percent of seats in parliament, lacked the necessary votes. Determined to by-pass congress, Chavez proposed asking the people directly in a consultative referendum. Despite congress disapproval, the Supreme Court decided that the referendum could be carried out. Venezuelans, sympathetic to changing a system they saw as inefficient and corrupt, overwhelmingly supported Chavez’s proposition in the referendum, which took place on April 1999. Almost 88% of the people voted in favor, although there was a high abstention rate of 62.35%.<sup>10</sup> Later, on July 25, using the

electoral rules also approved in the same referendum (a plurality instead of proportional voting system), the government was able to win 122 of the 128 Constituent Assembly seats, despite receiving just 53% of the vote.<sup>11</sup> The Assembly went on to write “the most ‘presidential’ constitution of Latin America.”<sup>12</sup> It allowed immediate reelection, and the presidential term was increased from five to six years. The senate was eliminated, turning congress into a unicameral body. The president acquired the right to promote the highest military officials without parliamentary approval. He also acquired the power to call referendums without consulting congress. Moreover, public financing of political parties was forbidden—although in practice this only applies to opposition parties.

On December 15, the constitution was ratified in a referendum with 71.78% of the popular vote, and a 56% abstention rate.<sup>13</sup> On December 30, in a shockingly authoritarian move, the Constituent assembly dissolved both the Supreme Court and Congress, and installed a special commission packed with Chavez supporters. The commonly known “Congresillo,” or little congress, concentrated the power of all branches of government until July 2000, when the new state powers were elected. Before being dissolved, the Constituent Assembly also appointed the Supreme Court judges, the new electoral council members, and the heads of the new “citizen power”: Prosecutor General, Comptroller General, and Ombudsman—Most appointed officials were widely seen as Chavez supporters.<sup>14</sup> Chavez went on to win the “megaelections” held in July, where all public posts were up for elections, including the President, the National Assembly deputies, state governors, and city mayors. The president was reelected by 59.7% of voters, more than the 56.2% he obtained in the 1998 elections. The abstention rate was 43.69%.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the Patriotic Pole, a coalition of parties supporting Chavez, won 60%<sup>16</sup> of parliamentary seats and more than half (13)<sup>17</sup> of all governorships. Taking advantage of his new legislative majority and showing a blatant disregard for opposition parliamentarians, Chavez asked the National

Assembly for decree powers in a variety of domains. On November 14, an enabling law is passed by parliament giving decree powers to the president for a 12-month period. The government did not make public any of the laws it intended to pass until the end of the decree period, on November 2001, when 49 laws were presented to parliament.

The months preceding the announcement of the laws had been tense between the government and opposition. Several government actions had provoked strong reactions in the opposition forces, the middle class, and even the military. Government intentions of reforming the public and private education system raised fears about political indoctrination of students. Military involvement in social programs caused discontent in the opposition, and in sectors of the armed forces. Moreover, Chavez populist discourse, pitting the poor against “the oligarchs,” alienated the middle class, which saw a threat to private property in the violent language of the mandatary. This Manichaeian discourse of exploiters and exploited, the serious weakening of the separation of powers, and the publication of 49 decree laws—without any prior parliamentary discussion—drove the opposition to radicalize its stance against the government. Under the leadership of the labor Federation (CTV) and the employers’ union (FEDECAMARAS), opposition protests became commonplace. Opposition leaders asked publicly for Chavez resignation and the media increased its attacks against the government. Several military and government officials abandoned their posts; including Luis Miquelena, minister of interior and Chavez’s right hand. The President, undeterred, kept strengthening his grip on state institutions. On April 7, using a whistle and on live television, Chavez fired several top executive members of PDVSA, the national oil company.

On April 11 close to a million people manifested against the government in the Capital. The protesters, in an unexpected turn of events, mobilized towards the Presidential Palace, where they clashed with government supporters. Several people died and hundreds were injured,

prompting Chavez to activate the “Plan Avila,” designed for cases of extreme national threat. Reluctant to use military force against protesters, the high military command disobeyed the order and asked the President to step down from power. Reportedly, Chavez signed his resignation, and eventually was taken to an island off the coast of Venezuela. A group of the opposition led by the leader of FEDECAMRAS, Pedro Carmona, assumed power and dissolved all state institutions. This unconstitutional action made several high military officers change their mind about the coup, restoring Chavez to power just 48 hours after being ousted. The coup actually ended up benefiting Chavez, who purged the military, making sure only his supporters stayed in the top echelon of the institution. Similarly, after overcoming an oil strike organized by the opposition on December 2001, lasting close to 3 months, the President fired 60%<sup>18</sup> of PDVSA’s employees, and took control of this valuable source of petrodollars. Both major conflicts, rather paradoxically, resulted in defeats for the radicalized opposition, giving Chavez control of key institutions.

Following an international intermediation between the opposition—gathered around the “Democratic Coordination” (CD)—and the government, both parties agreed to have a recall referendum for the President. In 2003, Chavez’s popularity was around 43% and the opposition believed it had a good chance to come out on top. That same year; however, the government started several social programs, known as “Misiones,” which provided, among other things, free healthcare, cheaper food products, and basic education to the country’s poor. The rise in oil prices experienced since 2003 funded these programs, which dramatically increased the government’s popularity. Using its control of the electoral council, the government delayed the referendum until this popularity was clearly reflected in the polls. Moreover, the Supreme Court, the last institutional counterweight to Chavez’s government, was finally taken over after parliament passed a new law that allowed the President to reform the institution. Such laws, known as “organic” in Venezuela, cannot constitutionally be passed with less than a 2/3

legislative majority. Despite this, The National Assembly approved it with a simple majority, packing the Supreme Court with Chavez supporters. With all state powers in the hand of the governing party, the illiberality of the political system was manifest.

Obtaining the approval of a recall referendum involved collecting 20% of registered voter's signatures. In a strikingly undemocratic action, once collected, the signatures were published online by a government official. Thousands of people became vulnerable to discrimination from the state as a result. On August 2004, the government won the referendum with 58,32% of the votes and the lowest abstention rate in 12 years (39%).<sup>19</sup> The opposition, demoralized, decided to boycott the 2005 legislative elections, handing the government a supermajority in the National Assembly. The boycott was a grave mistake of an opposition discouraged by a highly popular president in control of all state institutions. On December 2006, Chavez was reelected by 62.9% of voters, with the widest margin in Venezuela's history. The opposition candidate, Manuel Rosales, got only 36.9% of the vote.

Nobody could deny the high popularity of the government in 2007. Chavez started his third presidential term (2007-2012) confident in that he could use this popularity to transform Venezuela's political system according to his socialist project. By way of a referendum, the President intended to "reform" 69 of the 350 laws in the constitution. More than a reform, the measure was equivalent to creating a new constitution, which would have involved calling for a Constitutional Assembly. The government; however, treating it as reform, had parliament rubberstamp the laws and submitted them for approval in a national referendum. Originally affecting 33 articles when Chavez published it on August 15, the reform proposal was expanded to its final 69 articles by Parliament in the following months, before the referendum took place on December 2. Largely due to its radical content, which alienated even Chavez supporters, the reform was rejected by a small margin, becoming the first and only electoral defeat of the



charismatic leader. The reform, besides containing unorthodox elements such as reducing the voting age to 16 years, and removing Presidential reelection term limits, it involved the following far-reaching changes: Constitutionalizing the government's ideology by declaring Venezuela a "socialist state" with a "socialist economy;" By-passing municipal-level governments using the "comunas," a new local form of government created in 2006, and which operates under the direct control of the central government; Increasing repressive capabilities during states of emergency; and giving the President more control over the military, among other things, by creating the "Bolivarian Militias."

The student movement was highly involved in fighting the reform, and their campaign was seen a major cause of the opposition victory. The referendum had also taken place just a few months after a major TV channel, RCTV, was denied a new license by the government. Without taking the matter to court, the government unilaterally decided to deny the license to the channel accusing it of supporting the 2002 coup. Venezuelans, who had grown up watching the more than 50-year-old channel, were shocked when it stopped broadcasting its signal on May 27. Moreover, several military members had publicly expressed themselves against the referendum, including General Baduel, the man behind Chavez's return to power after the 2002 coup. The closing of RCTV and Baduel's critique of the reform's radical content, without a doubt, had an important effect on election results. After the defeat, Chavez became more repressive towards opposition figures, using his control of the judicial power against them. Baduel, for example, was condemned for corruption and sentenced to 8 years in prison. Moreover, 270 candidates were banned from participating in the 2008 regional elections, 200 of which were opposition candidates. Continuing to show high popularity; however, the government won 17 out of 22 governorships in the election. The opposition won five governorships, including the important

oil-producing Zulia state, where Manuel Rosales was elected Governor. Moreover, Antonio Ledezma, an important opposition leader, was elected Mayor of Caracas.

In 2009, the government became more hostile toward opposition candidates. Governor Manuel Rosales, for instance, was accused of corruption and had to leave the country to avoid imprisonment. Another key opposition figure, Antonio Ledezma, was stripped of most of his mayoral functions, which were arbitrarily transferred to another ad-hoc institution. The government also imprisoned Judge Maria Lourdes Afiuni for releasing a Chavez critic from prison. Afiuni's case, heavily criticized by international organizations, showed the government was not willing to allow any judicial independence. The same year, Nelson Mezerhane, a major owner of what was then the last opposition TV news channel, Globovision, was accused of several questionable charges by the government. Mezerhane ended up fleeing to the US to avoid prosecution. The President of the same channel, Guillermo Zuloaga, also became a target of the government, which accused him of illegal business activities. Zuloaga and his son, also involved in the alleged crimes, fled to the US to avoid ending up in prison. These government accusations are part of the harassment private media was often subjected to during Chavez' stay in power. Laws that allowed easier media censure were passed by parliament in 2004, 2005, 2008, and 2010. During the last year, The Supreme Court was repacked with Chavez supporters, which allowed the government to keep committing similar power abuses.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps the most evident act of authoritarianism and power ambition of Chavez, was to resubmit (he did in 2007 unsuccessfully) indefinite presidential reelection to a referendum in 2009. The President did this even though the constitution forbids having a referendum on the same constitutional reform twice within the same Presidential term. Having won the approval of the reform, the President was able to run for a fourth term in October 2012. Chavez won the elections with an ample 10% margin over the opposition candidate, Henrique Capriles Radonski.

The charismatic president died of cancer on March 2013; however, and new elections were scheduled for April 14. Once Again, Capriles lost the election—this time by small 1.49% margin—to the revolution’s candidate, Nicolas Maduro.

### Maduro’s Presidency: Increasing Repression

Maduro has followed his predecessor in both his statist economic policy and in his repression toward the media and the opposition. With respect to the media, Globovision—then the last opposition TV news channel in the country—was acquired in May 2013 by individuals who have since changed its editorial line to make it more pleasing to the government. Since February 2014; however, when students started protests against government policies in different Venezuelan cities, Maduro’s government has turned particularly repressive. In a 103-page long report issued by Human Right Watch, the organization reports that more than 150 people were subject to human right abuses by state authorities during the protests. Venezuelan TV-news channels abstained from showing images of the protests that lasted several weeks for fear of government reprisals. The same day the protests started (February 12) the Colombian-based international TV channel NTN24, was removed from the air by the government as it showed images about the protests taking place in Caracas.

The government also reacted by accusing the three opposition leaders who organized the protests of several crimes. Presidential candidate Leopoldo Lopez, for instance, was jailed on February 18. He received an almost 14 yearlong sentence in September 2015. Less than a month later on March 24, Maria Corina Machado, another main opposition figure, was stripped of her post as parliamentarian in the National Assembly. Finally, another organizer of the protests and important opposition figure, Antonio Ledezma, was jailed in February 2015. The government has also become particularly hostile toward the written media. Opposition newspapers “El Nacional”

and “Tal Cual,” have had to reduce their page-count because the government denies them the foreign currency necessary to purchase printing paper. Moreover, the owners of these two newspapers, in addition to the owner of “La Patilla,” an online newspaper, were sued for a multimillionaire sum by Parliament President Diosdado Cabello. The media owners were targeted by the second most powerful man of the revolution after they published a Spanish newspaper article that linked Cabello to drug trafficking.

### Economic crisis and loss of Popularity

Maduro inherited a heavily statist economic model from his predecessor. Due to the strict regulation of the market, Venezuelans were already suffering from scarcity of basic products and high inflation during Chavez Presidency. The new government; however, failed to take any significant economic measures to reverse these economic problems, making them worsen every year. Surprisingly, these economic problems were manifesting themselves at a time where oil prices were high, demonstrating the inefficiencies of Venezuela’s economy. After the oil prices started a downward trend last summer, the Venezuelan economy has further deteriorated, to the point where economists and institutions frequently talk about a possible Venezuelan default.

The economic data is discouraging for Venezuela. The IMF expects inflation to reach 158.1% by years end, and Its PIB will have contracted by 10% according to the same organization.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, scarcity has become a nation-wide problem: Venezuelans have to stay in lines for hours outside supermarkets due to strict government rationing policies. Rice, coffee, milk, cooking oil, and corn flour are among the hundreds of products that have become hard to find. More importantly, the economic crisis has had a huge negative effect on poverty. After being brought down by Chavez to 22% in 2012, poverty has jumped to a new record of 73% by November of this year, according to a report from three major Venezuelan universities.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, Venezuelans live in a constant fear of being robbed, killed or kidnapped, due to the worsening of public safety during the years of the revolution. In 1998, when Chavez arrived to power, there was a homicide rate of 19 per 100k inhabitants, according to Venezuelan investigative police force PTJ (now CICPC).<sup>23</sup> By 2012, according to the World Bank, Venezuela's crime rate reached 54 per 100k inhabitants, the second highest in the world. Furthermore, according to the ONG Venezuelan Violence Observatory (VVO) the homicide rate reached a staggering 82 per 100k in 2014.<sup>24</sup>

Maduro's popularity has suffered because of these socioeconomic problems. His support has fallen 29 points since 2013 to 22%, according to Venezuelan polling agency DATANALISIS. The government party, PSUV, is supported by only 16% of the population, according to the same report, whereas the opposition forces are supported by 40% of Venezuelans.<sup>25</sup> On December 6, as forecasted by all polling agencies, the government suffered a wide defeat in the parliamentary elections. So far, through its second official (preliminary) online bulletin, the electoral council has announced that the opposition party (MUD) won 107 seats in the National Council, whereas the government party (PSUV) won just 55 parliamentary seats. Contrary to what many Venezuelans feared, the government has not engaged in any major election fraud, and President Maduro was quick to publicly accept the government's defeat on live Television. Fears of election fraud had increased after the government declared several municipalities in a state of emergency only a few months before the elections. In August 21, following an incident at the Colombian border where Venezuelan soldiers resulted injured by Colombian paramilitaries, the government proceeded to close the border and to declare a state of emergency in different cities of the Táchira state. Since then, the government has extended the state of emergency to several cities in the states of Táchira, Zulia and Apure. These measures allegedly taken by the government to fight against contraband and Colombian paramilitaries seem autocratic or at least

exaggerated, and were seen as a threat to the normal development of the DEC 6 elections in the areas concerned by the state of emergency.

## Notes

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- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., p.20
- <sup>13</sup> Meucci, M. Á. M. (2012). Apaciguamiento: El Referéndum Revocatorio Y La Consolidación De La Revolución Bolivariana. Caracas, Venezuela: Editorial Alfa, p.40
- <sup>14</sup> McCoy, J., & Myers, D. (2007). *Venezuela: Del Pacto de Punto Fijo al Chavismo*. Caracas: Los Libros de El Nacional, p.312
- <sup>15</sup> Meucci, M. Á. M. (2012). *Apaciguamiento: El Referéndum Revocatorio Y La Consolidación De La Revolución Bolivariana*. Caracas, Venezuela: Editorial Alfa, p.41
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- <sup>17</sup> Meucci, M. Á. M. (2012). *Apaciguamiento: El Referéndum Revocatorio Y La Consolidación De La Revolución Bolivariana*. Caracas, Venezuela: Editorial Alfa, p.41
- <sup>18</sup> Corrales, J., & Penfold, M. (2015). *Dragon in the Tropics: Venezuela and the Legacy of Hugo Chavez* (second edition). Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, p.25
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<sup>24</sup> Venezuela: segundo país del mundo con mayor tasa de homicidios. (December, 2014). Retrieved November 30, 2015, from <http://www.noticiasrcn.com/internacional-america/venezuela-segundo-pais-del-mundo-mayor-tasa-homicidios>

<sup>25</sup> Datanálisis revela que popularidad de Nicolás Maduro cae a 22%. (November, 2015). Retrieved November 30, 2015, from <http://www.eljoropo.com/site/datanalisis-revela-que-popularidad-de-nicolas-maduro-cae-a-22/>



## Conclusion

The socioeconomic factors that plagued Venezuelan Provinces during the colonial times— particularly widespread poverty and lack of education—are still a fundamental problem of today’s Venezuelan society. Furthermore, even after becoming stronger and centralized thanks to the professionalization of the military during Gomez’s government and to the oil wealth, the Venezuelan state continues to be weak, incapable of effectively applying the rule of law in the country. These institutional and socioeconomic deficiencies have allowed for Populism and Authoritarianism to find its way in Venezuelan government, through Presidents such as Hugo Chavez and Nicolas Maduro. A big part of the blame goes for the political parties and politicians of the Punto Fijo system, who failed to come together at key moments of our political history, to save the essence of the democracy they helped to build. Now, the country has degenerated both politically and economically. Militarism, Authoritarianism, and Communism, all thought to have disappeared during the long democratic period, have come back to hunt the land of Simon Bolivar, confirming the fears the liberator expressed shortly before his death, when he said the country would fall “infallibly” in the hands of the “unbridled populace” first, and on those of “almost imperceptible tyrants of all colors and races” afterwards.

During Chavez government, Venezuela turned from an electoral democracy to a Competitive Authoritarian Regime. Chavez has created and Maduro has continued a system modelled on socialist and populist tactics similar to those of the Cuban Revolution. Chavez used his high popularity to win elections and control all state institutions. He then used this institutional power to repress civil society and to found a new heavily statist and authoritarian political system. His popularity rested on high oil prices—which permitted constant government spending—and on his political discourse, which pitted the haves against the have-nots. All these

features were maintained by his successor, who inherited a destroyed economic system and who has not taken the necessary orthodox economic measures to improve the worsening economic crisis, exacerbated by falling oil prices since summer of 2014.

Maduro and his party, the PSUV, have dramatically lost popularity since April 2013, when Maduro was elected. This decrease in popularity translated into a resounding government defeat during the DEC 6 parliamentary elections. Although final results have not been officially announced, the opposition claims to have obtained at least 112 seats in parliament, one more than the 111 needed to obtain the maximum “qualified” majority in the National Assembly. This unprecedented parliamentary victory of the opposition is bound to bring an increase in political conflict if both parties are not able to start a dialogue and work with each other. The existence of two radically different political and economic models makes cohabitation harder in Venezuela than in countries where politics are much less polarized.

Having acquired a majority in parliament, the opposition can convene a national referendum to recall President Maduro as soon as mid-2016. With his current low popularity, Maduro would be easily defeated in such a referendum. If the opposition decides to follow through with this measure, as several opposition leaders have suggested, cohabitation could in fact become impossible. The President and his party, confronted with the possibility of losing all political power and with seeing the end of the 17-year-old Bolivarian Revolution, may be tempted to resort to flat-out authoritarian methods to remain in power.

Despite their differences, the current seriousness of the economic crisis could make both parties be more willing to work with each other in short term. Oil prices are not expected to recover anytime soon, and applying sound economic policies would equally benefit both political parties. Both Maduro and the opposition have already said that working to improve the current economic crisis should be a main concern of the new National Assembly. If both the opposition

and the government show a sincere intention to recognize and govern with each other, polarization could be reduced and social conflict could be prevented. However, due to drastic ideological differences, a constant hostile discourse between the two parties, and a possibly upcoming Presidential recall referendum in mid-2016, such a reconciliation would be unlikely to last for the medium and long term.

The ample opposition victory in the recent parliamentary elections seems to support this thesis argument that Venezuela's political system is Competitive Authoritarian. Despite that the government enjoyed a communicational hegemony, unlimited access to state resources for political campaigns, and control over state institutions—used to jail opposition leaders and censure the media—the opposition was able to win the elections by a wide margin. Until now, the government has been willing to respect the popular vote as it loses competitiveness; It has shown the maturity and even respect for certain democratic principles to give up its 16-year-old grip on the legislative power. Will the government show the same political maturity and predisposition when Venezuelans decide to take away its now 17-year-old grip over the Executive? The answer to this question may determine whether the Bolivarian Revolution will go down in history as a hybrid regime, or as a fully-fledged autocracy.

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