



# “Chávez Did Not Come from Mars”: An Overview of De-democratization Processes in Venezuela from a Multi-Faceted Perspective

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## Introduction

In 2018, Tomás Straka, the historian and essayist heading the Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas “Hermann González Oropeza, sj”, at the Universidad Católica Andrés Bello (UCAB) and member of Venezuela’s National Academy of History (Academia Nacional de la Historia), initiated a project. He and several researchers examined the political and historical process prior to the arrival of *Chavismo* to power. This initiative became known as an approach to the de-democratization

of Venezuela. Several press articles, a book by Andrés Cañizález, and this study originated in those academic exchanges. In a jocular tone, Straka would remark: “It is not that Hugo Chávez just came from the planet Mars”. Most Venezuelans did not come to espouse his proposals and discourse by magic.

Nevertheless, in the minds of people in academic, political, and media circles in the West, Venezuela was a pampered tropical paradise exporter of oil, beauty queens, and soap operas. Above all, to many in the English-speaking world, *Chavismo* seems like an unexplained accident, as if it were the script of a Hollywood movie. This review seeks to demystify this vision by illustrating since when, for how long, how and why processes have emerged that have gradually dismantled democracy in this Caribbean country.

In reality, the rise of Chávez to power, on February 2, 1999, is the result of long years in which an anti-democratic, anti-systemic sentiment was brewing in the hearts of Venezuelans.

Venezuela has sailed ahead or against the high or low tides of democracy. It began its own in 1958 when dictatorships were rampant in the continent; until the mid-1970s, it was a favorable case study of Rostow’s modernization theories in the West during the Cold War; its fight against insurgency was successfully swift; it achieved remarkable social, economic, health, and infrastructure achievements; it consolidated a middle class. It achieved all these accomplishments before many of its neighbors could.

However, at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the economic model entered a dead end; poverty doubled; institutions began to erode; corruption scandals, riots and coups d’état resurfaced. Consequently, in 1998 society voted overwhelmingly for an anti-establishment candidate in successive elections, applauded his policies against the previous order and was seduced by his narrative. In 2007, it went further and officially adopted Bolivarian socialism, far more radical than any other modality of the Pink Tide<sup>1</sup> in Latin America nuanced. Another oil boom financed a wave of nationalization and regulation amidst an organic increase in the purchasing power of the poorest between 2004 and 2011. Soon after, it plunged into a crisis similar to the real socialisms of the 1980s: Bankruptcy, the largest recession in recorded history, and the second-

largest external displacement crisis in the world (UNHCR, 2022).

In this research, we will analyze the process that led, in 1998, a majority of voters to elect the man who promised to change the game and overturn the established order. What happened in pre-Chávez Venezuela to create the conditions for the democratic rise of *Chavismo* to power? We will also reflect on the exercise of power by *Chavismo*. As we move further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Venezuela moves further backwards; the world's indicators and ratings for democracy, human rights, and activities of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) placed the country at the bottom of their lists (Chapultepec Index, 2022; OHCHR, 2023, January 23). In general, Venezuela now appears alongside war-torn nations such as Yemen, Sudan, or Syria, among the worst rating for democracy or economy, with a painful record of repression (OHCHR, 2022, September 20).

In this regard, de-democratization has a double face in Venezuela's recent history. In one aspect, it may comprise an approach to contextualize and explain what happened, particularly in the fifteen years preceding Chávez's electoral victory in December 1998.

For that seminal 2018 research, we initially relied on Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2018), Yanina Welp (2020), as well as Kapstein and Converse (2008).

Levitsky and Ziblatt, authors of *How Democracies Die*, review how the democratic system is eroded from within, and corroded by authoritarian characters who rise to power playing by the rules of the democratic game. This dismantling of democracy in our country is what has begun to be called the process of de-democratization of Venezuela in a profuse academic production.

Drawing on examples such as Venezuela, Poland, and Hungary, Levitsky and Ziblatt claim that democracies today are no longer attacked by military coups and other violent methods of usurpation of power. On the contrary, since the end of the Cold War, some governments emerging from elections have disrupted democracies. They are destroyed from within. A central issue in their explanation is the emergence of "extremist demagogues" in democratic systems and the kind of response that the system itself and its elites give to these characters.

They recurrently refer to two South American cases which cannot be any further from each other in ideological terms: Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Alberto Fujimori in Peru. In essence, the above authors posit that elites failed. According to them, in both Peru and Venezuela there was “a lethal combination of ambition, fear and miscalculation”. This “conspired to lead them to make the same fateful mistake: Eagerly handing over the keys of power to a burgeoning autocrat”.

Our criticism of Levitsky and Ziblatt’s assessment is that they divide the world into good guys and bad guys. The former are represented by those political parties in their role as guardians of democracy to “keep authoritarian people in check”; these are obviously the bad guys, authoritarian people with a psychological propensity to accumulate power and bend the rules.

In the American scholars’ bestseller, four indicators are proposed to identify which profile of politician is prone to destroy a democratic system: a) Rejection of (or weak commitment to) the democratic rules of the game; b) denial of the legitimacy of political opponents; c) toleration or encouragement of violence, and; d) readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including media.

In Levitsky and Ziblatt’s book, there is little questioning of the elites, not only political but also intellectual, for their role in preventing openness towards effective functioning of democracy, or what those in power did to make society less unequal and thereby preserve the democratic system in the long term. The basic question is what happened to those elites who did not respond to a deep-rooted dissatisfaction against the democratic system, ultimately embodied by Chávez.

However, social unrest as a factor of crises, an issue that Yanina Welp (2020) underscores by way of criticism, is eluded. Instead, the political elites are questioned for not having realized the danger embodied by such figures. In Venezuela, where the population already associated democracy with a decent standard of living before the advent of Chávez into the public scene, Welp challenges academics regarding an issue that seems to us crucial in this reading “from the south”: Freedom is upheld as the supreme value, without giving similar weight to the quality of life translated into meeting such needs as health and food.

With their own view, Kapstein and Converse draw a clear yellow line to identify eventual enemies of democracy: Those leaders who, once in power, focus on reversing the constitutional norms in force. To reach this conclusion, the authors rely on historical evidence. Another reflection of these authors revolves around polarization as a distinctive feature of demagogic leaders who seek to undermine democratic consensus. However, the role of citizens is not addressed. They merely limit themselves to arguing that more unequal countries, nations with greater social gaps, are more likely to experience an erosion or even a reversal in their democratic system.

This review will detail further conceptual contributions found in recent years, key weaknesses from the model of democratic system adopted in 1958 which gave way to the advent of *Chavismo*, economic populism in the form of redistribution of wealth with its past and current inequality as a decisive factor, the turning point of pragmatism in party politics, the authoritarian traits ranging from “participatory democracy” to the Communal State, the role of the opposition, as well as prior and present issues regarding industrialization and poverty. Our reflection on the topics above is non-linear, going back and forth in the timeline of events as a means to understand their nature and impact on the de-democratization processes being experienced by Venezuela from the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to these first two of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is the historical frame we have chosen for our analysis as it encompasses a generation before Chávez’s rise to power and a generation after that event.

## Analysis Enriched by Conceptual Diversity

Two of the most obvious signs of de-democratization in Venezuela are, on the one hand, the complex humanitarian crisis in the form of the second most massive emigration worldwide since 2017 and, on the other hand, the existence of two rules since the interim presidency from 2019 to 2022.

Let us illustrate this in the form of the news-cycle mindset in English-speaking countries. It was not an interruption of regular programming. It was not that in 1998 we were happy and, a year later, everything

changed for the worse. It is necessary to dispassionately study the gradual and so far unstoppable process of how *Chavismo* dismantled the democratic model to perpetuate itself in power.

We propose to explore the change of realities in Venezuelan life. We should see de-democratization, the name we give to these changes, as a process political in nature along a historical framework as defined in the Introduction.

The terms ‘democratic erosion’, ‘autocratization’ and ‘de-democratization’ address the need to name this process. We have chosen ‘de-democratization’ because an eroded democracy remains a democracy and autocratization points to an autocratic regime as a result. On the other hand, de-democratization in Venezuela can lead to various outcomes, because of its semi-authoritarian, autocratic, totalitarian, and even anarchic ramifications.

Seeking to solidify this research process of more than four years, we resort to the approaches below contributed by scholars from across the world to define the reality addressed in this paper:

For the Catalan political scientist, politician, and lawyer Josep Maria Vallès, de-democratization is “a dissonant word to designate a threatening reality. It describes the democratic regression that can affect political systems” (2013, December 12). This contribution of Vallès arises from his analysis of the Spanish reality.

On the other hand, let us turn to Charles Tilly (2007), late American historian and political scientist, the scholar who coined the term in his book *Democracy*, and who defines it as follows: “On the whole, de-democratization occurs in the course of rulers’ and elites’ responses to what they experience as regime crises, most obviously represented by threats to their own power”. He characterizes this phenomenon and provides indicators to observe in a political system, the context being the chapter dedicated to India.

From Mexico, the professor and political researcher Ángel Sermeño (2021), holds that de-democratization:

[...] translates into a widening extent of arbitrary and illegal traits in the performance of government bodies, as well as in the weakening of

the representative constitutional framework regulating the legitimate spheres of decision making for each one of the (executive, legislative, and judicial) branches of political power. (Sermeño, 2021)

To add the optics of a scholar from the Middle East with an academic life in Europe, we have relied on Behrouz Alikhani (2017). This Germany-based Iranian political scientist and professor warns that “processes of de-democratization can gain strength if the power resources of a society are increasingly monopolized by a specific ‘sector’ and institution or by a group of influential individuals.” He makes these reflections in the context of the United States.

With this broad conceptual toolkit, we seek to review different countries and the same phenomenon, also occurred in Venezuela, one of democratic regression affecting political systems, noted by Vallès, in which power resources are increasingly monopolized by influential sectors or individuals, according to Alikhani. On the other hand, we examine the responses of rulers and elites in our country to the crisis of seeing their own power threatened, as noted by Tilly. Likewise, we will observe the symptoms of this de-democratization in the extent of arbitrary and illegal traits, as identified by Sermeño, among public officials and the weakening of the framework governing the branches of public power.

In fact, with the change from one constitution (1961) to another (1999), from the three classic divisions (judicial, legislative, and executive), to five (executive, legislative, judicial, electoral, and citizen), we can witness such weakening. This did not bring about an improvement, but rather the opposite, in the democratic and institutional performance of the Venezuelan State.

We have decided to avoid the ‘breaking news perspective’ with headlines of events known by Venezuelans as *El Viernes Negro*<sup>2</sup>, *El Caracazo*<sup>3</sup>, *La Constituyente*<sup>4</sup>, the Recall Referendum 2004, the *guarimbas*<sup>5</sup>, or others. Conversely, we pursue an analysis of the processes and factors listed in the Introduction.

## The Democracy of *Puntofijismo* Gives Way to a Messianic Hyper-Leadership

Although the timeline of our analysis spans from the 1980s to the 2020s, it is necessary to recall the origin of the political model prior to *Chavismo*. This was one of compromise of elites formalized in the Puntofijo Pact (*Puntofijismo*), known as such because it was signed in the homonymous house of Christian Democrat leader Rafael Caldera.

This pact between the political elites was signed by the leaders of these parties: Independent Electoral Political Organization Committee (Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente, COPEI – center-right – Rafael Caldera, Lorenzo Fernández, Pedro del Corral), Democratic Action (Acción Democrática, AD – center-left – Rómulo Betancourt, Gonzalo Barrios, and Raúl Leoni) and Democratic Republican Union, (Unión Republicana Democrática, URD – left – Jóvito Villalba, Ignacio Arcaya, and Manuel López Rivas).

The need for a revision and a sort of re-foundation of the system, which was beginning to be raised among scholars and analysts of the time, did not resonate with those in power. As Jesuit Arturo Sosa analyzed in January 1978, the Venezuelan democratic system had been leveraged by the oil economy. The 1958 model, based on a pact of elites, was not only political, but also included the private business sector. The population perceived that in democracy it was possible to get ahead, to rise socially. Along with the modernization that Venezuela experienced in the first 15 years of democracy, a middle class was also consolidated.

The oil boom that coincided with Carlos Andres Perez’s first term in the presidential office (1974-1979) caused the system to collapse and encouraged consumerism aspirations among Venezuelans. They expected to reach levels of prosperity not supported by their effort or productivity. Already in the final stretch of this administration known as Pérez I, “an immense social struggle for the sustainability of the model” began to be experienced according to Sosa (1978).

In the popular imagination, the democratic model was not only a system of freedoms and political rights, but was also identified with economic welfare and possibilities of social mobility. Already in 1978, Social-Christian Luis Herrera Campins (COPEI) positioned his run



for president, to which he acceded for the period 1979-1984, with the incisive question: “¿Y dónde están los reales?” (“And where are the bucks?”) It was not trivial to wonder where the wealth product of the oil boom since 1974 had gone.

The fact that the popular vote, after the intoxication of petrodollars during Pérez I, benefited a political adversary like Herrera Campins, who wondered where the wealth had gone, reveals the limiting dynamics that were experienced and that deeply eroded the credibility of democracy. Poverty grew amid a higher oil revenue; corruption became rampant as public budgets quadrupled. Consequently, this combination, along with other factors, helped social unrest begin to brew, a de-democratizing factor according to Welp (2020).

According to an editorial in *SIC* magazine (Centro Gumilla, 1978), the Pérez I administration was regarded as a last opportunity to re-establish democracy, to renew the link between the population and the political class – a looming crisis not responded by the elite, in an early instance of Tilly’s view (2007). After the most welcomed nationalizations of iron and oil, “the deceptive words, the outrageous dealings, a greater concentration of wealth insulting a nation” were pointed out as very negative elements of Pérez’s administration. *SIC* foresaw that an electoral victory by Luis Herrera Campins would be the product of “the disasters of the government” of Pérez I, as it finally occurred at the polls.

For Michael Penfold, author of the essay “Adiós al Puntofijismo” ([“Farewell to *Puntofijismo*”], 2000), two factors explain the failure of the model. On the one hand, the effect of the drop in oil income into the Treasury, which exacerbated many of the initial contradictions within this tropical model of the democratic system; on the other hand, the increase in electoral competition due to changes in the voting system and the start of direct mayoral and gubernatorial elections.

The political pact in Venezuela was successful to the extent that it had resources for its redistributive scheme. When this mechanism ceased to work due to the fall of oil revenue, a process of delegitimization ultimately found its way into the electoral ballot box, boosting an outsider to power – as was Chávez in 1998. Regarding the greater electoral competitiveness at the local level – apparently an advancement

for democracy –, this was not supported by a strengthened institutional framework, but quite the contrary.

Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, *Puntofijismo*, primarily became a moniker of that compromise and search for consensus which was the germ of Venezuelan democracy established in 1958. The popular vote had undoubtedly punished those who had governed under the model. Moreover, it could be envisioned that this majority support would fall on the shoulders of a leader who was then difficult to read. Furthermore, it was not clear where he would lead the country, only that we were on the verge of a change of era in the nation.

Luis Gómez Calcaño (1999) identifies early on three traits in the nascent exercise of power by *Chavismo* that, in his opinion, would undermine a true institutional reconstruction in Venezuela. From the outset, it was heading towards a repetition of the failed schemes of the 1958-1998 period. For this scholar linked to the Center for Development Studies (Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo, CENDES), weak government institutions were the key to explain what was beginning to brew in the country during 1999, or in Vallès’s words, “the democratic regression that can affect political systems” (2013).

A first identified was Chávez’s messianism, which ended up supplanting a failed institutional model (Gómez Calcaño, quoted by Prieto, 2020, June 7). The person above the institutions was a common practice at that time. It was thought that placing fresh officials, “committed to the people” in key institutional positions would be enough to put an end to corruption.

*Chavismo*, marked by a messianic leadership, did not create a modern party either. In 1999, there was the V Republic Movement (Movimiento Quinta República, MVR, precursor of the current ruling party), an outfit established a year before under pressure from the electoral authorities so that Chávez could formally register his presidential bid: A party established under the leader’s whims, a denial and annihilation of the institutional framework in practical terms, in other words under an “extreme demagogue” (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). *Chavismo*’s inaugural administration – and this was one of the primary reasons that catapulted him to an electoral victory – found democratic institutions deeply discredited.

It was the year 2000: President Hugo Chávez was in his first months in office, and polls revealed that his approval ratings were higher than votes he had obtained during the election. It was a time of reflection and forecast. On the one hand, the failure of the 1958 model was assessed in different circles and with this, a cycle was closing in Venezuela. On the other hand, there were many concerns about the new cycle: The so-called ‘Bolivarian Revolution’.

Francisco José Virtuoso (2000) pointed out that Chávez symbolized “the Bolivarian civic republicanism that is part of the ideological identity of the Venezuelan Armed Forces”. What were good intentions, aligned with popular longings, did not hide from Virtuoso elements that were extremely unsettling already during those first months of his administration: The inexistence of a national project in which the aspirations of Venezuelans and the good intentions of the president, his government, and his political allies would materialize, the absence of teamwork among high-ranking government officials, the continuous reliance upon (retired and active) military and upon military institutions to fill political vacancies and manage social or development programs, and the lack of expertise of most of the officials in the exercise of the positions entrusted to them.

The notable institutional weakness evident across the country in 1998-1999 had as a response messianism and personalism. With his powerful public discourse, Chávez seemed to be the only answer to a multitude of problems. The opportunity to re-institutionalize the country was lost. On the contrary, the new power scheme took advantage of that moment, but used it to mold the institutions according to the dictates of the political messiah.

In Gómez Calcaño’s opinion, another feature was the deepening of a populist subculture. It was evident to this scholar that the direct relationship between citizens and the head of state was reaching very high levels. This non-institutional relationship was not intended to address the issues and propose eventual solutions to the crisis in Venezuela. Instead, people merely reached out to the new power holder with letters and slips of paper to request employment, financial aid, or health care. *Chavismo* blurred the institutional mediation between citizens and the presidential office. With this, the opportunity to rebuild the fabric of Venezuelan state agencies was missed, in a

textbook example of the weakening of the representative constitutional framework (Sermeño, 2021).

Institutional weakness, inherited by *Chavismo* and subsequently exacerbated by Chávez himself, showed a last feature: The non-existence of modern political parties in Venezuela. At the beginning of *Chavismo*, the two flagship parties of the 1958-1998 era, AD and COPEI, were a sort of caricature of the groups that decades earlier had spearheaded the modernization of the country. Their debacle was decisive in the institutional erosion experienced in Venezuela.

### **Redistribution of Oil Wealth: The Other Face of a Failed Model**

More often than desired, primarily political-institutional variables have been reviewed to explain the reasons for the collapse of the Venezuelan democratic system. However, in order to understand the de-democratization in Venezuela, we must look at the failed model that had its central expression in the financing of economic and economic growth and social welfare by means of fiscal proceedings from hydrocarbons (oil revenue), that is, the redistribution of oil wealth, or *rentismo* in academic literature in Spanish.

In this regard, economist Víctor Álvarez (1989), noted:

We could say that the manifest weakness of the domestic productive infrastructure, the intensification of the inflationary process, the dramatic levels of unemployment and underemployment, the growing deficit in the balance of payments, the liquidation of international reserves, the unstoppable deterioration of the bolívar against the dollar, the negative interest rates discouraging savings, and the persistent fiscal deficit are the main challenges that make up the critical picture of the Venezuelan economy. (Álvarez, 1989)

This quote does not correspond to the first three years of Nicolás Maduro’s administration (2013-2016), immediately prior to the hyperinflationary spiral in Venezuela. Álvarez, also a minister during the government of Hugo Chávez, wrote it when making an appraisal of the economic legacy of Jaime Lusinchi’s administration (1984-1989).

Upon noticing such parallelisms between the handling of the economy in the final stages of *Puntofijismo* and the rule under *Chavismo*, Venezuela resembles a dog turning around to bite its own tail.

As Asdrúbal Oliveros and Armando Gagliardi (2017, May 1) have recalled, Venezuela's political class had already received a strong warning on *Viernes Negro*, during the government of Luis Herrera Campins, regarding the unsustainability of the model. However, in hindsight, there was neither the ability nor the will to change the way in which what was then called "State capitalism" was being managed. According to these analysts, the administration of the next head of state, Jaime Lusinchi, had a litmus test to turn the economic model around in 1986. That year, the price of oil fell abruptly from USD 25.94 per barrel to USD 13.31 per barrel, a drop of 48.7% in one single year.

The foundation of the model was wrong in the 1980s and is still wrong in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: It was – and is – based on the international price of oil, a variable that evidently cannot be controlled. Indeed, the Venezuelan history of the last decades makes clear the cyclical nature of the international price of crude oil. High prices do not last forever. Only that our rulers, yesterday and today, seem to believe so.

Another cause noted by Álvarez regarding Lusinchi's administration, which is very similar to the economic practices of Nicolás Maduro's government in its first three years, was the dutiful compliance with the foreign debt payments. Rather than defaulting, for Álvarez, a sharp drop in revenues should have as a response a renegotiation given the country's diminishing capacity to pay.

An issue not clearly addressed by this economist, nor by Oliveros and Gagliardi in their assessment of the Lusinchi period, is the political decision behind every economic stance when exercising power in a country like Venezuela. Times of lean cows are perceived as transitory, as all those who have held the presidential office since the boom of the 1970s onwards bet on a rise in international crude oil prices as the main leverage of their economic policies.

Cycles of expansion of public spending, followed by economic recession, were repeated in Venezuela between the post-oil boom (1980) and the rise of *Chavismo* to power, practically at the dawn of

the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The national leadership did not manage to remove the country from this perverse logic. Another shower of manna, another oil boom, was always expected. In this dynamic of high expectations and deep recessions, Venezuelan society was also immersed and more deeply impoverished.

Economist Luis Zambrano Sequín (1998) briefly described what had been a constant in terms of economic policy in Venezuela in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Episodes of huge booms followed by deeply recessive phases typical of the Venezuelan economy, given its reliance on oil and its already chronic institutional weakness (Sermeño 2021). It is not unwarranted to describe Venezuela as one of the most volatile countries in the world.

One of the harmful effects of the failed model of redistribution of oil wealth on democracy is more poverty and wider inequality. Against the backdrop of a deep process of de-democratization in Venezuela, the debt of representative democracy regarding social issues opened the floodgates to a model built on a socialist discourse, but with similar results of poverty and deeper inequalities. Again, past and present elites give answers to crises that undermine democracy (Tilly, 2007).

At the beginning of Hugo Chávez’s government, the late Venezuelan psychologist, academic, diplomat, and politician Mercedes Pulido de Briceño (1999) made a social assessment that proved to be prophetic: “Growing inequality fragments society and fosters resentment”. This is how millions of Venezuelans have lived, especially in the recent years of the Bolivarian Revolution.

It must not be forgotten that Chávez acceded to power on a narrative of resentment. Mercedes Pulido held that Venezuela had been experiencing years of impoverishment. “Poverty, which in 1982 affected 27% of the population, at the beginning of 1998, 68.7% of Venezuelans did not have enough income to meet their basic food and other needs [...]”.

The crisis of the model of redistribution of oil wealth resulted in long years of economic and social decline. That was the breeding ground for the unrest among Venezuelans that Chávez capitalized on as a candidate. In the 1998 social outlook described by Pulido de Briceño,

the scarce development had fundamentally affected the middle class; education lost momentum as a means of social mobility; heads of household with higher education and in poverty had gone from 1.5% in 1980 to 4.7% in 1997.

Such figures may pale in comparison to the situation triggered by the accelerated impoverishment as of 2014-2015. To the poverty and inequality exacerbated by *Chavismo* and its misguided hyperregulation and expropriation policies, must be added the opacity and lack of official data, typical of the Maduro administration. This is an example of the widening extent of arbitrary and illegal traits in the performance of government bodies, as well as the weakening of the framework regulating its branches (Sermeño, 2021).

### **The point of No Return: Nosedive into Pragmatism**

A year that made clear the depletion of traditional political class was 1998. It also made very evident the diminished ability of the elite to reinvent itself and respond to growing social demands for change.

Francisco José Virtuoso (1998) reviewed what was a political game to reach or cling to power, with no connection to the demands of society. Virtuoso criticized the excessive pragmatism that had been the constant throughout a presidential run in which the traditional party campaigns seemed out of the fuel of emotion from and connection with the masses.

The Radical Cause party (La Causa R[adical] – labor left) supported former Miss Universe and Mayor of Chacao, an upper-middle class borough of Caracas, Irene Sáez, so did COPEI. The Movement Towards Socialism (Movimiento al Socialismo, MAS – center-left), against the guidelines of its founders Teodoro Petkoff and Pompeyo Márquez, joined the *chiripero*<sup>6</sup> of early *Chavismo*. Meanwhile, AD stood behind the strongman who controlled the party rank and file but who lacked any charisma: Luis Alfaro Uceró. Already in the final stretch of the campaign, Venezuelans witnessed more chess moves, since COPEI and AD would end up supporting the very successful Carabobo State Governor Enrique Salas Römer, backed by his on Project Venezuela

(Proyecto Venezuela) party. All this political juggling was done in an ostensibly improvised fashion.

Amid the campaign, Virtuoso questioned:

Regardless of the strengths and weaknesses of the current group of candidates for the Presidency of the Republic, what is surprising is that the fundamental reason why this or that political organization selects a member of such group is a utilitarian and pragmatic calculation for electoral gain, in disregard of ideological tradition, the identification between candidate and national project, or even the belonging to the organization. The only thing that seems to prevail as an underlying reason is the bottom line of what the polls that the mass media are in charge of publicizing [...]. (Virtuoso, 1998)

Since the mid-1980s, the country had been undergoing a gradual process of de-democratization amid which the political class was unable to reinvent itself. It is a classic example, in the perspective of Charles Tilly (2007), of how rulers and elites experience a regime crisis due to threats to their power posed by the environment.

All this accelerated process of institutional implosion did not give way to self-criticism and soul searching within the parties. In an ostensible absurdity, a few days before the elections, AD expelled Alvaro Uvero from its ranks because he refused to decline his presidential bid in favor of Salas Römer. It was the last and desperate move of pragmatism.

### **A Popular Democracy: Top-down Authoritarianism under the Guise of “Participatory Democracy”.**

Amid the effervescence generated by Hugo Chávez and his proposals among the energized masses to practically overhaul the country during 1999, a *Constituyente* (Constitutional Convention) initiative was gaining momentum. We were facing one of the main promises of *Chavismo*'s electoral platform.

Hugo Chávez was just sworn in as president on February 2 that year. As Margarita López Maya and Luis Lander (2000) pointed out at the time, his accession to the presidential office was consolidated with 3.6 million votes (36% abstention). Meanwhile, the approval for drafting new constitution obtained 3.3 million votes and an abstention slightly



higher than 55%. The authors questioned the possibility of Chávez's popularity to promote a radical reform of the democratic system.

Before the referendum for the approval of a new constitution in December 1999, Jesuit theologian Pedro Trigo (1999) warned about the danger of building a new democratic model "from above". Early *Chavismo* insisted on doing away with "representative democracy", since it served the elites, and advocated the need for a "participatory democracy". In truth, what happened with the repeal of the 1958 constitution was the acceleration of a process of de-democratization. The shortcomings of the 1958-1998 democratic model received in response an exacerbation of its ills, in an example of reversing the constitutional norms in force, a trait of enemies of democracy according to Kapstein and Converse (2008).

For Trigo, the constituent conversation posed the great risk that the draft text would end up being imposed "from above", from the State; for analysts such as López Maya and Lander, the challenge was to separate Chávez's popularity from social and participation mechanisms conducive to a democratic change. In truth, what happened was that Chávez ended up saturating the *Constituyente* conversation. Consequently, in many respects, a constitution was tailor-made to his wishes and expectations. The highest law of the land approved in 1999 was not the product of a genuinely participative process. It was not drafted "from below", from among the people and their social, community, and grassroots organizations. After all, "popular democracy" is a term that emerged from the real socialism of Eastern Europe.

Trigo noted: "The people were called upon to participate in conducting what they had not designed, managed, or controlled. In the name of the people, the people were denied as a subject, they were replaced."

In his view:

The people cannot be mere recipients of handouts or mere enforcers of what they do not conceive of, manage, or control. If the ruler limits himself to calling on the people to collaborate with him, if non-government organizations limit themselves to framing the people from paradigms alien to them, the people will never be able to exercise their citizenship. (Trigo, 1999)

That which was born imposed from above enjoyed some early years that several analysts considered positive in terms of popular participation in different realms. The re-election of Chávez in 2006, as noted by López Maya (2011), and his hellbent efforts to impose the model of the “21<sup>st</sup> Century Socialism”, fossilized fledgling participation initiatives. From then on, “popular power” came to be understood as a denomination for the State, a motto co-opted by a *Chavismo* which took over the institutions and by Chávez, with a clear intent of perpetuating himself in power.

## The Role of the Opposition

Just as *Chavismo* became an authoritarian power with hegemonic pretensions, for a long time, the opposition has been wandering in the wilderness to articulate a democratic alternative with a coherent strategy. The de-democratization, prior to *Chavismo* and catalyzed by it, must also be understood as the failure of that much sought after democratic alternative in these years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Critical reflections on the opposition to *Chavismo* have been a recurring element when studying the nature of the regime inaugurated in February 1999, once Hugo Chávez took office. Even from its inception, the authoritarian project embodied by *Chavismo* had as a correlate failed opposition actions or strategies that paved the way in the former’s avidity to seize all power in Venezuela.

Francisco José Virtuoso (2004) raised the stakes for thinking of an alternative to *Chavismo*. This author stated that, “for now” (at the time he wrote), it was not accurate to call Chávez’s government a dictatorship since, although its authoritarian traits were noticeable – or since it was dismantling democracy from within per Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), there were spaces for political and institutional action by the democratic forces that were then-adversaries of the regime.

Virtuoso reviewed Venezuela’s political landscape in the months prior to the recall referendum on the president scheduled for August 2004. Opposition factors were grouped in the so-called Democratic Coordinator (Coordinadora Democrática, CD); but this coalition

already looked weakened once Chávez was reinstated in office after the failed coup d'état of April 2002 and the failed oil strike (December 2002 - January 2003).

However, the opposition had institutional muscle: It controlled an important number of gubernatorial and mayoral offices; it exercised checks and balances at the National Assembly (Legislative, unicameral; per the Constitution of 1999); and the Supreme Court justices ruled independently, without the need to be aligned with the *Chavista* power.

Regarding the challenges to be faced by the Venezuelan opposition, Virtuoso identified three: 1) to formulate a vision of the country that would be understood by *Chavistas* and non-*Chavistas*, in the form of in means and ends with real possibilities of implementation; 2) to build a political space of unity, which should be translated into a single political strategy; and 3) to integrate the Venezuelan people, who should feel called and invited to participate in this alternative project of society.

In the Jesuit's opinion, the opposition had repeated a strategic error by focusing exclusively on the thesis of "removing Chávez", without considering the key factors that brought *Chavismo* to power: "The opposition has ignored the task of doing politics, conquering spaces, reaching agreements and compromise, rebuilding the parties". In his opinion, the opposition had fallen into the polarization game, a strategy proposed by *Chavismo* for its own benefit.

*Chavismo*'s discourse basically appealed to a dichotomic logic, to divide society. Chávez built antagonistic issues to face the people against the oligarchy and the nation against imperialism in the national narrative.

Nelly Arenas (2005) indicated that, throughout his political activity, Chávez had developed a narrative essentially marked by his anti-elitism against political parties, the Roman Catholic Church, the media, business, and longtime unions. "Rotten Ivory Towers" ("Cúpulas Podridas") was the moniker used by Chávez since the days of the electoral campaign to call the representatives of the old establishment.

On the other hand, in those days, Professor María Gabriela Cuevas (2004) also reflected on the situation. This UCAB researcher was then analyzing the human rights at stake from the perspective of the recall

referendum. Viewed from the perspective described by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), he was ready to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including the media.

Chávez understood the referendum, not in the terms proposed as a right of citizens to recall the mandate of a ruler, but quite the opposite: Consolidating his power. We should remind that, during the year in which the referendum was postponed, his government launched the social health program aimed at underprivileged communities named *Misión Barrio Adentro* (Inner City Mission). Consequently, as shown by surveys of the time, this initiative contributed to raise his approval ratings again, a factor that contributed to seal his continuity in office.

The possibility of turning to the ballot box to recall the presidential mandate of Hugo Chávez or, years later, of Nicolás Maduro, would face a series of stall tactics and hurdles. The first referendum was only possible to the extent that there was international mediation, with a prominent role of the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Carter Center. *Chavismo* tampered with the process to postpone it as long as possible, a factor that played in its favor. The latter did not make it past the calling stage.

These precedents led the researcher to argue that there was a violation of the right to political participation by setting conditions and requirements additional to those provided for by the 1999 constitution. Since then, the mechanism that would serve to make Venezuela more democratic, the recall referendum, has not been implemented again.

Although acronyms, alliances, increasing or decreasing government offices held, the twists and turns in the opposition wilderness have continued to repeat themselves: The CD was succeeded by the Democratic Unity Roundtable (*Mesa de la Unidad Democrática*, MUD); this coalition achieved a landslide majority in the National Assembly during the 2015 parliamentary elections; it subsequently lost momentum after infighting; from the remains of the MUD, the opposition coalition was re-founded as the Unitary Platform (*Plataforma Unitaria*) in 2021; from this same opposition-controlled Legislative emerged the Interim Presidency held by House Speaker Juan Guaidó since January 2019, dissolved by the opponents themselves by late 2022 (Jiménez, 2023, March 28).

Upon reading the above paragraph, it seems like a series of flashbacks to 2004. Some elements of analysis valid that year seem to be fully relevant almost twenty years later. Seen from Alikhani's point of view, the power-monopolizing practices of the current regime hinder the performance of the opposition, at the same time self-sabotaged by its deep-seated de-democratizing instincts and its condition of previous elite – or yet unconsolidated elite – in its responses to crises, according to Tilly (2007).

### **The Communal State: A Non-Democratic Response from *Chavismo* in Disregard of Industrialization and Social Issues**

In a departure from the tradition favoring civil institutions that prevailed in the country aptly associated with the democratic model of 1958, Venezuelans made a bid for the *caudillo* (strongman) figure embodied by Chávez. Tomás Straka (2019, November 4) ascribes this twist in the thesis of Democratic Caesarism, which has had so many interpretations since it became known. “We ended the 21<sup>st</sup> century surrendered to the hyper-leadership of Hugo Chávez, ‘Cesar’ and ‘democratic’ in the exact meanings given to these categories by Laureano Vallenilla Lanz”, held the historian.

In December 1998, following an overwhelming electoral victory, at a time when *Chavismo* had not yet taken over the government bodies and agencies, a new stage in Venezuela's politics began. The crisis of democracy, which had been unfolding since the 1980s, ended up receiving as a response the “medicine” that would end up exacerbating problems. *Chavismo* ended up being a non-democratic response to the process of de-democratization that was already underway at the turn of the century in Venezuela.

By the end of the 2000s, attempts to take stock of the first 10 years of *Chavismo* once it took power in Venezuela were timely. Historian Margarita López Maya (2008) identified what, in her opinion, were four vulnerabilities that, witnessed with the passage of time, indeed epitomize the weaknesses of the Bolivarian Revolution. Such flaws only intensified the erosion of democracy in the country.

As the first vulnerability, the historian pointed out “the excessive dependence on a charismatic leader and, consequently, the lack of credible collective leadership at different levels”. Already back then, López Maya was concerned that the former MVR, rebranded as United Socialist Party of Venezuela (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela, PSUV) could consolidate itself “to act as a counterweight to the leader and promote new leadership from below”.

A second vulnerability of the government consisted of the political polarization as an official strategy. In the author’s opinion, this prevented the Chávez government from “broadening its support base. Polarization keeps high levels of political instability and public inefficiency due to the exclusion of middle class and professional groups”.

For López Maya, the third vulnerability already evident in 2008 in the political project headed by Chávez had to do with what she named “non-democratic socialism”, in her judgment reproducing “the bureaucratic-authoritarian style of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Socialism”.

The fourth issue itemized by the historian, within this non-democratic socialism, was:

The concentration of power in the hands of the president, unchecked by the other branches of government or civil society, his discretion in the use of public resources, the pressure on public employees to be *rojos, rojitos*<sup>7</sup> not to lose their jobs, the asymmetric electoral competition between the government and those who disagree with it, and the intolerance towards political pluralism [...] weaken the legitimacy of the project. (López, 2008)

Mercedes Pulido de Briceño (1999) said that *Chavismo* moved forward slowly but surely. Although some objectives may be on hold, certain proposals, such as the Communal State, are relaunched. This model had its climax in the national conversation in 2010 and resurfaced in 2021 (Gómez, 2021, March 12).

The initial floor debate at the National Assembly regarding Law on Communal Cities (Ley de Ciudades Comunes) was completed on March 11, 2021. The tactical reason then was to skip the allocation of funds lawfully destined to municipalities, diverting them to the communes. In this way, *Chavismo* was preparing its war chest before an

imminent defeat in the mayoral and town council elections that year.

Eroding, weakening, contradicting the constitution that the Bolivarian Revolution itself enacted in 1999 seems to be a strategy sustained over time. When the constitutional letter favored its exercise of power, it was exalted; when it ceased to be useful, it has been blown up. We are before another classic example of arbitrary performance of public powers that weakens the legitimate spheres of decision making provided for in the constitution itself, according to Sermeño (2021). In this way, Chavismo has intensified the de-democratization in Venezuela.

Another instance of Venezuela's political class walking in circles then and now is the discussion on the issue of Venezuela's industrial capacity. When Venezuela undergoes a decrease in its oil revenues, the need to diversify production resurfaces in the national conversation. Different proposals in this regard cyclically end up shelved once the price of oil rebounds in the international market.

The illusion of a rich country began in 1974 with the *Gran Venezuela*<sup>8</sup> of the Perez I administration. The oil market boom in the 1970s significantly marked national life. Even for some thinkers and politicians, such as Ramón J. Velásquez (2005), that moment was truly the turning point in national life, one from which we did not recover in the following decades.

With oil prices above USD 100 per barrel, *Chavismo* also had its times of bounty. In 2006, when Chávez was reelected, people also experienced the feeling of being in a country where everything was possible. During those periods, a sort of intoxication is pervasive, not only among political leaders, in which it is impossible to discuss the need to manufacture things other than oil.

Back to the Lusinchí presidency in 1984. The era of low oil prices in the international market led to measures in two directions: Currency devaluation – thereby making a lower public revenue in dollars more profitable to postpone the political fallout of national budget cuts, on the other hand, stimulus of national manufacturing.

The word *du jour* was 'industrialization'. Over the years, much more was said than done. Political decision-makers paid lip service to

industrialization only at times of low oil prices; but it was swiftly dismissed as soon as the oil price cycles picked up during the last five decades.

Miguel Ignacio Purroy (1984), then an article writer and university professor, warned the Lusinchi government about the scope of the economic measures to be taken. They could not be limited to the exchange rate and the focus should really be on national manufacturing:

[...] the urgency (for taking measures) lies in the inflationary germ of any devaluation. Devaluation is good, as long as it leads to an expansion of production. If this expansion does not take place, devaluation generates only and solely inflation, and of the most perverse kind. (Purroy, 1984)

Since 1984, Purroy argued that in Venezuela it was an absolute priority to move forward to an import substitution policy. In his analysis, Purroy already made it clear that private business had a key role to play in this longed-for economic reactivation.

Already in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the warning calls made by economic thinkers continued. Universidad de Los Andes (ULA) professor and World Bank (WB) advisor Alejandro Gutiérrez questioned the fact that, during the Nicolás Maduro government, the economic policy was limited to fictitiously fixing the dollar exchange rate; but the country’s core problem was not addressed: Lack of manufacturing. Venezuela is still unable to guarantee its food self-sufficiency.

During an interview granted to Víctor Salmerón (2017), Alejandro Gutiérrez questioned the Bolivarian Revolution for its pretense of “solving everything with imports”. The country seems caught in a circle revolving around its problems to always return to the same diagnoses.

In 1984, the proposal of the social agreement spearheaded by Jaime Lusinchi as his main political pillar of government was also a motive for debate. Unfortunately, the lack of avenues for popular participation in the national conversation and the partisan co-optation of entities such as the Venezuelan Workers’ Confederation (Confederación de Trabajadores de Venezuela, CTV), aligned with the ruling AD party, would end up being factors spurring the need for a major change in the political system, which finally arrived in 1999 with Hugo Chávez.



According to Arístides Torres (1985), “growing hints of generalized dissatisfaction on the part of voters, of corruption, of bureaucratic inefficiency, and of questioning of party leadership and management” were beginning to manifest themselves. There was, in fact, a favorable climate among academic groups, public opinion leaders, and a fledgling citizen movement, for a change in the political and electoral system to be discussed and approved. In essence, it was proposed that those “elected should serve the interest of the people and not that of their parties”.

The regime crisis experienced by the ruling elites as threats to their power in a process of de-democratization – as pointed out by Tilly (2007) – is evident in these lukewarm responses to their interests and revolving stories to the substantial priorities of citizens and the nation, such as industrialization. It was true in the 1980s and remains true in the 2010-2020s.

The democratic model that emerged in Venezuela after the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez not only failed in managing institutions towards perfecting their democratic nature, but also failed to resolve social inequalities. This catalyzed the overwhelming electoral victory, in December 1998, of a Hugo Chávez who promised a Bolivarian Revolution full of social justice and a war against corruption.

Fast forward to July 2020, revealing data from the Living Conditions Survey (Encuesta de Condiciones de Vida, Encovi), on poverty were released. Venezuelans who do not consume 2,200 calories a day from a basic food basket are extremely poor. Those who are able to ingest these calories, but cannot afford utilities such as electricity and transportation, are poor. Per the Encovi, at the end of 2019, 79.3% of Venezuelans lived in extreme poverty and 96.2% were poor (quoted by Salmerón, 2020, July 7).

Precisely in March 1999, at the beginning of Hugo Chávez’s government, poverty and impoverishment were two priority issues in the social agenda for the nation. Putting an end to poverty was one of the most vocal promises of the Bolivarian Revolution. After more than two decades, the country is not only still marked by poverty, but it increased exponentially vis-à-vis the last administration of the two-party democratic period (1958-1998).

Back in 1998, Mercedes Pulido (1999) noted that a Venezuelan household required 2.5 minimum wages to meet its basic needs. This implied that, in poor households, at least two people had to work, something unlikely because of unemployment (not so high in those years) but also due to the erosion of the formal employment market.

Pulido proposed as priorities to strengthen basic education, improve the quality of employment, increase the number of jobs, address factors with a high impact on poverty such as teenage pregnancy, and devise stable policies to assist the poorest with schemes to prevent their dependence on government handouts as a way of life.

Chávez’s unfulfilled promise made it evident that the fight against poverty cannot rest only on the will of one man, but that different institutional actions of a multidisciplinary nature and sustainable in the long haul are required. The Venezuelan experience at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century shows that spreading the wealth only mitigates poverty – for a while, as long as the State provides. Once the country falls back into low oil prices, poverty also rises sharply. To date, there is no evidence of social or political learning in this regard.

Back to the value of elementary education as a factor of social mobility, we see a counter-intuitive effort. In the years of the Bolivarian Revolution, emphasis was placed on the multiplication of universities, with projects and proposals of dubious academic quality. This was a political response to the autonomy and independence of public and private institutions of higher education<sup>9</sup> facing political power.

According to projections made by Venezuelan education expert Juan Maragall (2017, June 13), based on surveys conducted in Miranda State, half a million children had deserted from schools during the 2016-2017 academic year. In total, according to Maragall’s estimates, 1.5 million children and teens are excluded from the school system in Venezuela. There is no official response to this compelling issue.

The lack of government action to what is truly core social issues became evident by this sad paradox: While such school desertion was taking place in 2017, the relevant minister seemed more preoccupied in political duties, following his appointment as head of the ruling-party campaign for a second National Constitutional Assembly

(Asamblea Nacional Constituyente, ANC)<sup>10</sup> which, after three years in session, could not even produce an article for another promised new constitution.

A perverse circle was then repeating itself, and we are facing it again in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: As it receives fewer dollars, the Venezuelan government gets more indebted to keep up with its expenses and issues inorganic currency to fund its populist policies. Nothing seems to have changed, it is the history of the challenge as a society that repeats itself endlessly in Venezuela.

## Conclusion

In the four decades encompassing this research, we could identify processes giving rise to factors decisive in the de-democratization of Venezuela. The time frame selected enabled a dispassionate analysis of issues addressed in this article. This freed us from the breaking news or news cycle mindset in the benefit of English-speaking readers, which enables them to make a clearer, deeper sense of the how's and why's of Venezuela's political landscape.

The early body of work originating this investigation relied on views of the American scholars chosen for the original project at the UCAB, namely Levitsky and Ziblatt, as well as Kapstein and Converse. The former two contribute primarily political concepts into the study of failing democracies, while the latter authors, albeit including economic concerns in their view, fail to address more intently social issues and the role of the titleholders of the system of democratic government, that is, the people. Even Yanina Welp, who made a clearer statement on the implications of social unrest in de-democratization, does not look much further into citizen participation.

Consequently, for this research, and seeking to broaden the perspective on the matter discussed, we included concepts from Vallès, Tilly, Alikhani, and Sermeño. Thereby, we attempt at providing our work with facets from American and European worldviews, increasing Latin American perceptions, and integrate those of a scholar with a Middle Eastern background. It would be pretentious to call our

activity on these academics’ contributions a conceptual framework; we merely gathered a modest, yet diverse toolkit to explore the decline of democracy in Venezuela from a more comprehensive perspective.

Both the model of political compromise in Venezuela’s democratic system under *Puntofijismo* and the current regime under *Chavismo* proved true many of the concerns raised by the group of scholars relied upon. Some of the indicators of de-democratization can be found below:

From Levitsky and Ziblatt’s standpoint, over his early months in office, it was not accurate to call Chávez’s government a dictatorship since there was room for action by the opposition. His dismantling of democracy formally began with the nature and behavior of the *Constituyente*. Prior to that development, apart from the undeniable fact of breaking into the national stage by means of his two failed coup attempts in 1992, only the makeshift outfit hastily established as his political party, then known as the MVR, and his skills as an “extreme demagogue” were the only two hints at his detachment from the rules of the democratic game. This rejection or weak commitment to rules is the first set of indicators conceptualized by the two above scholars.

As for the other sets of indicators to identify the profile of politicians prone to destroy a democratic system, *Chavismo* fills all the boxes. Both Chávez and Maduro have gradually denied the legitimacy of political opponents, from gerrymandering the *Constituyente* and the Legislative to repressing, incarcerating, and torturing opponents and political dissent, as documented by the OHCHR fact-finding missions, and different measures in between, such as having candidates disqualified or taking over parties through lawfare. Not only has the regime tolerated, but it also has encouraged violence by means of both repression and crackdowns targeting demonstrators and clashes with armed *colectivo*<sup>11</sup> groups. As for curtailing civil liberties, the latest iterations of the Chapultepec Index of Freedom of Expression and the Press place the country at the bottom of its ranking.

Regarding the social dimension of de-democratization, Yanina Welp (2020) allows us to notice that poverty grew amid a higher oil revenue; corruption became rampant as public budgets quadrupled. All this became a breeding ground for social unrest and the delegitimization

of democracy.

The critical indicator ultimately unveiling the de-democratizing nature or early *Chavismo* was that noted by Kapstein and Converse (2008): A leader who, once in power, focused on reversing the constitutional rules in force by convening a *Constituyente* for enacting a tailor-made law of the land. This was conducted under the guise of the need of doing away with “representative democracy” and replacing it for a “participatory democracy”.

Josep María Vallès (2013) points to a systemic change of a regressive nature. A decline in the already weakened institutional framework, an increase of state intervention in the economy and expropriations, as well as greater vulnerability of underprivileged groups, steep increase of poverty, and a worsened climate for the exercise of free speech and other civil liberties by means of repression are examples of this democratic regression.

Viewed under the definition of de-democratization by Charles Tilly (2007), the first presidential term of Carlos Andrés Pérez was the last golden opportunity to re-establish democracy, to renew the link between the people and the political class. Another example of crises poorly addressed by the elite was the looming debt of Venezuela’s representative democracy towards social issues, as well as the remedy producing worse results in the form of a model built on socialism, one with worse results and deeper inequality.

This process of gradual de-democratization became more evident in the mid-1980s at the hands of political class unable to reinvent itself. Ever since traditional parties and their accompanying elite established since the late 1950s with the advent of democracy in the nation lost control over government bodies, they have been sabotaging themselves by their deep-seated undemocratic instincts. Therefore, their condition of previous elite – or yet unconsolidated elite – continues to display an unsatisfactory response to crises.

Another evidence of poor handling of threats to power is the lukewarm responses to and revolving stories about such key national priorities as industrialization. This has been an issue unresolved by the administrations in the 1980s and the ruling regime as of 1999.

Power-monopolizing practices of the current regime are evident in its undermining of the performance of the opposition, control over the media, taking over of a greater extent of non-energy means of production, circumventing of legitimate, long-standing local government bodies by means of the communes, to mention a few. It is practically impossible for Venezuelans to go about their daily activities without paying money to, dealing with overregulation by, or being subjected to the discretionarily of the regime.

As for the widening extent of arbitrary and illegal traits in the performance of government bodies, as well as in the weakening of the representative constitutional framework regulating the authority of the branches of government identified by Ángel Sermeño (2021) as de-democratization, rulers of the last stretch of Venezuela’s representative democracy and of the sitting regime have been eager to produce plentiful evidence: Corruption stemming from the mishandling of oil revenue has chronically weakened the nation’s institutional framework; quasi-mythical cult of personality around *caudillos* has been covertly or overtly nurtured by Pérez and Chávez in a non-institutional relationship blurring the mediation between citizens and concerned government bodies; previously increasing poverty has given way to currently exacerbated inequality; opacity in and lack of official data has been the trademark of the Maduro administration; and the strategy sustained over time by the Bolivarian Revolution in eroding, weakening, contradicting even its custom-made constitution.

Despite all the process of de-democratization taking place in Venezuela over the last four decades. The civil liberties experiment started in 1958 has been successful to an extent: Two generations of Venezuelans grew up in democracy and have instilled its values in their children and grandchildren. One possible gap in the country’s institutional fabric during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was that guilds and associations were co-opted by political parties because there was no culture of citizen participation.

Subsequently, from the early signs of de-democratization in the 1980s, citizens have increasingly engaged in the public arena and, even with the restrictions imposed and the repression deployed in the context of increasing monopoly of power by the current regime, they have woven a vibrant fabric of NGOs and CSOs. Even amid the current

threats to their activities, seeds of a democratic culture keep growing across the nation.

We have questioned that the role of citizens is not addressed by most of the scholars from our conceptual toolkit, hence our intent to close this research with our appraisal of its relevance. How effective a deterrent of authoritarian practices these citizen traits of democratic culture can become is yet to be seen. Academic output in the future may focus on this potential role. Will this citizen participation peacefully and gradually permeate parties, communities, and education? Will any efforts in this regard be effectively undermined by the regime? Will attempts at gaining citizen participation spaces take the form of clashes and protests being met with repression? In the years to come, we will witness whether the dismantling of democracy in Venezuela can keep its course unchallenged or to which extent efforts to restore civic freedoms may succeed.

## NOTES

1. Pink Tide: Catchall term for the different center-left of further leftist governments sweeping across Latin America at the turn of the 21st century.
2. Viernes Negro: Literally “Black Friday”, with no connection to the day for massive discount sales after Thanksgiving in the U.S., is the name given to the foreign exchange crisis resulting from a steep fall in Venezuela’s international reserves on February 18, 2023.
3. Caracazo: Massive protests and riots staged in Caracas on February 27 and 28, 1989, in rejection of the FMI-sponsored package of fiscal discipline measures adopted by Carlos Andrés Pérez at the beginning of his second term in the presidential office.
4. (Asamblea) Constituyente: Constitutional convention not provided for in the Constitution of Venezuela of 1961, but convened after a ruling based on a draft opinion by pro-Chávez Supreme Court Justice Juan Miguel Matheus. This body was controlled by chavistas who drafted the current highest law of the land in Venezuela, after being approved via referendum in December 1999. Controversy regarding this convention arose because it both passed and enacted statutes of questionable legality. La Constituyente should not be confused for the National Constitutional Assembly.
5. Guarimbas: Name given to barricades as a form of protest by opposition supporters in 2004, 2014, and 2017.
6. Chiripero: Literally, a “swarm of German cockroaches (croton bugs, water-bugs)”, it was the derogatory metaphor used in Venezuelan political jargon denoting a multitude of minorities of various partisan or non-partisan, social and community backgrounds during Rafael Caldera’s second run for president in 1993. This candidate adopted the expression as a compliment to the diverse cross-section of his followers, thanks to whom he again became president. This demographic of disaffected voters of multiple backgrounds was capitalized by Hugo Chávez in 1998.
7. Rojos, rojitos: Loosely translated as “l’il reddish red”, a term coined by former Oil Minister and state-owned Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA) CEO Rafael Ramírez for government-loyalist oil industry



workers' identity. This peculiar adjective spread as a symbol of loyalty to Chavismo.

8. Gran Venezuela / Venezuela Saudita: “Great Venezuela / Saudi Venezuela”, names given to the times of personal prosperity, economic growth, business expansion, and government splurge caused by the increase of oil revenue following the Oil Embargo 1973–1974 and nationalization of Venezuela's oil industry.
9. University Autonomy: In Spanish-speaking countries, this concept reaches beyond academic autonomy as practiced in English-speaking countries. University autonomy is a legal doctrine originating in Spain and its Realms of Indies, as its colonies were known during the rule of Habsburg dynasty. Universities were established by royal charter (Cédula Real) providing for their own authority to appoint chancellors and other officials, conduct academic affairs, and exercise campus inviolability.
10. Asamblea Nacional Constituyente (ANC): That is, National Constitutional Assembly, a regime-engineered parallel constituent and legislative congress, which was not recognized internationally, established as a travesty of the constitutionally sanctioned mechanism by means of a non-competitive electoral contest. This body thus inaugurated in August 2017 was denounced by the Venezuelan opposition, its legitimate Legislative, the US Department of State, the OAS, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), among others. This second convention was adjourned in December 2020.
11. Colectivo / colectivo groups / colectivos: Regime-supporting (and sponsored) armed gangs posing as community workers (“collectives”) aimed at clashing against and neutralizing opponents.

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