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# The Decline and Fall of Democracy in Venezuela: Ten Theses

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This paper presents an argument about the causes of the decline and fall of the 1958–1999 system of democratic politics, commonly known in Spanish as *puntofijista*, in Venezuela. Competing explanations of this process are evaluated, and an interim assessment of President Hugo Chávez and his political project is offered.

**Key Words:** Venezuela; Democracy, crisis of; Political parties; Chavez; Populism; Legitimacy.

This paper develops an argument about the decline and fall of democracy in Venezuela and an assessment of some of the most prominent explanations of what happened. Following a brief sketch of the old regime, I address central dimensions of its decay: elite and mass defections, leadership failure, organisational rigidities, institutional immobilism and inefficacy, declining legitimacy, and the limited capacity of new movements to consolidate into viable political alternatives. The discussion that follows the account of the old regime is organised around ten theses; each followed by a supporting statement.

## The old regime

The political system established in Venezuela in January 1958 ushered in the nation's longest uninterrupted period of democratic politics and unhindered civilian rule in the twentieth century. The operating rules and understandings of politics of this regime were crystallised in the Constitution of 1961, which until its demise was also the longest lasting of any of the country's modern constitutions. The system is often referred to as *Puntofijista*, after the foundational 'Pact of Punto Fijo' signed in early 1958 between the representatives of major political parties, excluding the Left.<sup>1</sup>

This political system has been the subject of intense and continuing study, and has provided a model case for the most varied arguments. Early works

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1 The name is accidental, and derives from the name of the house of Rafael Caldera, founder and leader of one of the major pacting political parties, and signatory to the agreements.

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(Alexander, 1964) saw Venezuelan democracy as a triumph of the 'democratic left', struggling to make civilian rule and mass politics work against enemies from the right (mostly the military) and the left (Cuban-inspired guerrillas). Some centred attention on the formation of powerful political parties (Martz, 1966; Levine, 1973; Levine and Kornblith, 1995), while others focused on the emergence of a public opinion supportive of democracy (Martz and Baloyra, 1979). An important group of scholars centred attention on elite pacts and compromises as providing the possibility of limited, but workable political agreements among former enemies (Levine 1973; and later, in different ways: Karl 1987; Rey 1991; Kornblith 1999). A different school of thought understood Venezuelan political institutions primarily as managers of mobilisation, specialists in a kind of politics that combined participation with control from above, in this case from the party elites (Powell, 1972). Another focused on how these compromises became embedded in the structure and operation of institutions and with what consequences (Powell, 1972; Urbaneja, 1992; Friedman, 2000; Crisp, 2000).

Despite these differences, most scholars acknowledge the power of petroleum, and the extent to which almost everything in the political system, from the form and extent of state institutions, to public employment or the smallest of bribes, depended on a foundation built with revenues from the oil industry. But agreement went little further. Some believed that although petroleum was essential, of greater political interest was the way its revenues were used; presumably put to different purposes by democracies answerable to the people and dictatorships answerable to a narrow clique. Those with greater interests in economics and 'development policy' saw petroleum as omnipotent, shaping the state and public expectations in critical and long-lasting ways. Differences between political regimes seemed less important than similarities generated by a common dependence on income from petroleum (Karl, 1987 and 1995 and, for a critique, Ross, 1999). However the impact of petroleum is viewed, there is little dispute that the enormous increase of petroleum revenues associated with the oil boom of the mid-1970s had transformative and mostly negative effects. Corruption escalated, inflation got under way, money was wasted in spectacular ways, and institutions, overfed with fiscal resources, staggered under the strain and began to fail. They could no longer deliver (Naím, 1993).

The particular form given to participation by Venezuela's strong political parties was first seen as a blessing, then as a curse. Political participation was organised around and through powerful political parties, which colonised civil associations such as professional groups and trade unions, and subordinated their internal structure and the bulk of their activities to the interests of the parties (Rey, 1991; Molina and Pérez, 1998; Friedman, 2000). Electoral laws further magnified the power of parties, by making it difficult for other kinds of groups to compete. Although barriers to personal participation (such as the vote) were low and turnout very high, the constricted choice built into this kind of participation came to be seen as a negative, as a sign of less authentic participation and representation. The pacts and compromises, once seen as essential to the inauguration and early stabilisation of the democratic system, after a while also

came to be identified as part of the problem. 'Pacted democracy' became a shorthand for 'restricted', 'tarnished' or 'frozen' democracy (Naím and Piñango, 1985; Hellinger, 1991; Karl, 1997).

The turn of the tide in the way scholars and observers have understood and evaluated specifically Venezuelan traits of this democracy was associated with the decline of the country's economic fortunes, which began in the early 1980s. Economic decline is always stressful, but becomes particularly threatening in a society dependent on an ever-increasing rate of increase of income, and accustomed to personal and group mobility. The turn of opinion was associated with *but not solely dependent* upon economic decline. New and more critical views also arose from a host of civil associations and groups that emerged around this time. These were the very children of the system, those spawned by its successes, who now sought a voice untrammelled by party mediation. The whole process took a while to gel, but hindsight lets us see it develop through the 1980s in groups like CEDICE, early statements such as *Más y Mejor Democracia* (Grupo Roraíma, 1987), a range of new NGOs and neighbourhood movements, and the founding and initial activities of COPRE (the Presidential Commission for Reform of the State).

Recent writing on Venezuela is almost uniformly pessimistic, stressing decay, decline, and 'the exhaustion of the model' (Ellner, 1995 and 1997; Levine, 1998). 'Exhaustion of the model' refers to the collapse of the formula that underwrote modern economic and political life: ample revenue from oil worked through a big central state and strong political parties to pay off clients and satisfy demands. Declining oil prices, a huge debt burden and mismanagement mean that there is no longer enough money to foot the bill and contain conflict through the adept use of patronage. The institutions that managed the system fell of their own weight: ossified and rigid victims of excess and old age. In this analysis, political results flow primarily from economic causes because the operating principles of the system hinged on managing the claims of groups organised by and loyal to the parties. Without goods to distribute, the edifice crumbles.

What did Venezuela look like in the years when it seemed immune to Latin America's chronic social and political ills? Key traits include consistent economic growth with improved equity, a centralised state paid for by steadily rising oil revenues, strong political parties that penetrated and controlled organised social life from top to bottom all across the national territory, and a military that was controlled, hemmed in and paid off. Pacts and agreements negotiated by political parties and party elites knit the system together and were implemented on a day-to-day basis through a vast network of formal and informal contacts and arrangements for sharing power and its spoils (Rey, 1991; Urbaneja, 1992). Bipolar party competition is often noted as well, but only emerges in the 1970s, and is best understood not as a cause but rather as a by-product of other changes. The system ran in accordance with the following 'rules of the game': in *economic* terms, strong currency, low inflation, sustained growth and a dominant role for the central state as regulator and distributor of oil revenues; in *politics* a centralised state, nationally focused institutions (including parties), a professional

political class recruited and brought up nationally, and of course, a subordinated military; and in *social* terms, mass education, great social and geographic mobility, and the gradual homogenisation of the country's cultural and organisational life.

The combination of these elements underscores the traumatic effect of a chain of events that sparked and sustained the crisis. The first was Black Friday (18 February 1983) when the currency collapsed, initiating the present period of depreciation, economic stagnation and inflation. Six years later came the bloody urban riots touched off on 27 February 1989 (27-F), a spontaneous response to the new government's structural adjustment package. Third were the attempted military coups of 1992, on 4 February (4-F) and 27 November (27-N), the first such in three decades. Further shocks were produced by the impeachment and removal from office of President Carlos Andrés Pérez (the so called 'coup of civil society' of May 1993), followed by the December 1993 election of former President Rafael Caldera, who abandoned the party he himself had founded (COPEI) and ran a brilliant campaign to win a four-way race on an explicitly anti-party platform. At each of these points a key pillar of the system was undermined or removed: economic strength (Black Friday); social pacts, control, and civil order (27-F); a depoliticised and controlled military (4-F and 27-N); and unquestioned executive dominance and party hegemony (the destitution of Pérez and the election of Caldera). The impact of these events was magnified by public scepticism and disaffection coupled with a surge of associational life independent of parties and party-linked networks. The nature of the crisis reflects the dimensions of decline: economic decay, political ossification and immobilism, and rising protest.

The economic crisis has been severe, especially given the record compiled in the first twenty years of democratic rule. Those years witnessed gradual improvement in income distribution, declining poverty, and a steady rise in indicators of social welfare from literacy and school population to health, diet and life expectancy. Beginning around 1980 wages and salaries stagnate, real income declines, the quality of services declines, access to services shrinks, poverty rises, old diseases return, and in general indicators of social welfare turn negative. Note that the decay of services is not the result of resource constraints alone. Despite economic downturn, resources continued to flow. But the capacity of state institutions to deliver services crumbled under the weight of mismanagement, corruption, and politically-bloated bureaucracies (Naím, 1993). The proportion of households in poverty and extreme poverty grew as average real income from wages and salaries dropped.

The most salient political dimension of the crisis is the reduced capacity of parties and leaders to channel conflict, control organisations, mobilise votes, and manage government and inter-party relations. The trust and credibility extended to leaders and parties (and unions) drops steadily. Party coherence and internal discipline decline, voter abstention grows, and new organisations emerge to challenge the parties' monopoly of public voice and representation (Rey, 1991; Molina and Pérez, 1998; Levine and Crisp, 1998a and 1998b). The growth of

abstention (from negligible figures to more than 40 per cent in national voting and much higher in regional and local elections) coincided with the erosion of two-party domination, not only of elections but also in control over key and core associations such as trade unions. Parties no longer had the discipline and unity required to come to agreement. Even if they had, leaders could no longer be confident of their ability to keep the parties' clientele in line.

Beginning in the early 1980s, groups identifying themselves as 'civil society' (a phrase and a reality unknown in earlier years, when political parties controlled organised social life) emerged and began to press with growing vigour for a change in the rules of the game. As used in Venezuela, 'civil society' embraces groups that are nationally organised as well as a host of regional and local associations. Even a short list would have to include the following: human rights organisations, insurgent unionism, *barrio* (district) groups and neighbourhood associations, ecological and feminist groups, cooperatives, local church groups (including a host of new evangelical and Pentecostal churches), local and regional cultural associations (including *ateneos* or literary groups, theatres, orchestras and music groups, dance groups and folklore societies), a broad range of 'non-governmental organisations' (NGOs) involved in education, research, and social service delivery all over the country, political parties and local electoral movements, new business associations and private foundations, along with federations and other peak associations that promoted coordination and common action among all of the above. Self-conscious efforts by elements of 'civil society' to present a common front, join forces to campaign for political reform, and reach beyond specific concerns to achieve a voice in policy making and politics are one of the really new features Venezuelan politics displays in recent years (Gómez Calcaño, 1998; Levine 1998, Levine and Crisp 1998a, López Maya, 1998).

The social movements that appear in these years (commonly referred to in Venezuela as 'civil society', in a usage that explicitly excludes parties) have their origins not in response to authoritarianism, but rather from within democracy. They are less 'popular' than has been the case elsewhere in the continent, with strong doses of middle- and upper-class participation (for example, in neighbourhood movements and business groups pressing for greater access). They arose to protest a political order in which representation and voice are monopolised by political parties. They seek new formulas for representation, greater access, and more public accountability from state and party elites.

The preceding observations provide us with tools for understanding Venezuela's crisis and its possible and likely future outcomes. They depict a society and political system where the undoubted strength of mobilisations was utterly channelled and controlled by political parties, who themselves were present at the creation of much of civil society. Economic and political dimensions of the model reinforced one another, providing the bases for a working system of representation, an effective formula of legitimacy, political coherence and governability for over thirty years. But when scarcity began to take a toll, institutions were already undermined and continued reliance on the

elements that once guaranteed coherence and stability (strong parties, a dominant central state, massive public resources) now brought weakness. Elites and mass publics were cut adrift: elites lost their accustomed tools of control, masses lost contacts and benefits.

Scarcity is important, but more is at issue than scarcity alone. The society experiencing scarcity was now a very different place: democracy and the long period of distributive politics had created an utterly new kind of citizenry, with entrenched expectations. This suggests that the sudden surge of poverty had added impact as it undercut hopes for mobility among the poor, and threatened new middle classes with a loss of status. The manifest incapacity of public institutions to deliver services and to give families hope for the future, was a particular blow. These considerations make sense of the seemingly chaotic electoral process of the late 1990s, in which parties divided and collapsed, front runners disappeared from view, Chávez surged out of nowhere in the polls, and alternatives coalesced around a pair of personalist coalitions. Institutions were so discredited, the sense of fear so high, and leadership in such disarray that mass publics were as much adrift as elites, and the drift went in Chávez's direction.

### **Ten theses on the decay of the old regime and the character of the new**

As I use the term, 'theses' are general statements intended to spark debate or inquiry. They are not narrowly drawn, 'testable' hypotheses of the kind familiar to social science. They are not designed to be 'proven' or 'falsified' with data collected for the purpose. This is not that kind of enterprise; the intellectual task is different. They are argumentative statements, deliberately provocative, and intended to stake out positions. These are important functions of scholarship.

*Thesis 1: The decay and collapse of the old regime was not pre-determined either by Venezuelan culture or by the character of the oil industry or the 'petro state'*

Scholars working in very diverse intellectual traditions and with widely-varying political positions could come together in seeing the decay of Venezuela's democratic system as confirmation of their theories and in some cases, fulfilment of long-frustrated political aspirations. The collapse of the old regime fit well (or was made to fit) within their working paradigms, and seemed to vindicate years of analysis and commentary. I limit myself here to four: *culturalist*, *petro-state*, *institutionalist* and *leftist*.

The first school to find its views confirmed was the 'culturalists'. Working off theses first developed by Richard Morse (1989), elaborating on Howard Wiarda (1973) and, in related ways, Lawrence Harrison (1985), these writers argued that there is an underlying and enduring cultural unity to Latin America, that this culture is hostile to democracy and favourable to strong rulers and authoritarian

forms of government, and that the effort to construct different kinds of politics (say democratic) is ultimately doomed to founder on the rock of persisting authoritarian culture. A recent exponent of this view for Venezuela is Richard Hillman (1994).

A second school of thought holds that the peculiar characteristics of the *petro state* (bloated bureaucracies, excessively autonomous leaders, endemic massive corruption, elitist institutions and truncated participation) make this particular democracy neither viable nor democratic. It is not viable because once the money runs out, or even if the rate of increase slows, patronage will dry up and loyalties wither. It is not democratic because too much power is in the hands of the state, and state elites, and too many instances of decision are removed from popular control. This position is most closely associated with the work of Terry Karl (1997).

A more political institutional variant of these views sees the collapse of democracy in some sense as the inevitable result of the system's corruption and immobilism. Michael Coppedge (1994) has coined the term 'partyarchy' to describe a political system controlled by party organisations, and ultimately organised by, for, and of the parties. Institutions operate to shield leaders from the people they are supposed to represent. The whole apparatus is a complex, fragile network of deals and payoffs, beholden to special interests and prone to factionalism and immobilism. Choice is constricted, representation is skewed and representation is necessarily less than fully authentic.

The fourth school of thought arises from the political left, and has the most at stake in terms of political aspirations. For the Venezuelan left, the demise of *puntofijista* democracy represents a confirmation of their own criticisms of that political system, and an opportunity to gain a political foothold. The left has long been marginal in Venezuela, without much of a popular electoral base. Leftist parties lost the organisational battles of the 1940s to Acción Democrática, were marginalised from the founding pacts of 1958, and further marginalised themselves by launching a failed guerrilla adventure in the 1960s. The position of the left has several important variants. One view holds that the weaknesses of the left stem above all from the compromises enshrined in the Pact of Punto Fijo, which robbed them of programmatic power and political support. The ideological commitment to democracy of the time is analytically subordinated to themes of class compromise which are said to have driven the foundational pacts of the system (Karl, 1987; Neuhaus, 1992). The Pact of Punto Fijo and related agreements are said to have nipped progressive and potentially revolutionary possibilities in the bud, sacrificing them to a kind of anti-communist centrism that was used to buy US support in the Cold War era (Karl, 1987). This position reverses the historical order of things, and utterly fails to acknowledge the historical weakness of the Venezuelan Left. The central point here is that as the system began to weaken, signs of opening were seen as opportunities by the left. Hence the remarkable burst of adoration of Chávez, and the working alliance with him, tested in the second failed coup of 1992, and later forged in the political alliance that became Chávez's electoral vehicle, the



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Movimiento Quinta República (Zago 1992; Gómez Calcaño, 1998; López Maya, 1998).

None of these schools of thought withstands sustained analysis. To make political systems dependent on a single factor, be it culture, class, resources or institutional formations is to ignore human agency and to ignore the fact that political outcomes are regularly the result of conflict and struggle. The culturalist case is particularly egregious. Wiarda (1973) and Hillman (1994) assert that Latin American, or in this case Venezuelan, 'culture' is always and ever the same. Leaders, issues, and circumstances may change, but culture endures. But this is to reify culture, and to make it work in some mysterious, automatic fashion. The petro state thesis also does not hold up well, either in Venezuela or in general. There is too much variation over time and too little attention to the particularities of policy-making conflicts (Ross, 1999). The institutionalist critique has more going for it, although a continued insistence on presidentialism as the problem and parliamentarism as the solution has little to recommend it. The likelihood of parliamentary rule coming on in Venezuela is zero, and anyway the Chávez replacement for a presidential system has been an even stronger presidency. Broader versions of the institutionalist argument that detail exactly how participation was constrained and that point to concrete ways of increasing points of access to government have greater likelihood of success (Crisp, 2000).

The case advanced by the Left is the weakest and in some sense the saddest of all. The fragility and shallow social base of the political left has long been palpable in Venezuela, and nothing much has changed in this regard. The key difference now is that leftist groups have a powerful friend in Chávez. The international left has also taken up Chávez's cause, depicting him as a revolutionary whose military background and connections guarantee that change will happen (Gott, 2000). This view is well summarised by Ceresole (1999: 1) who writes 'There was a democratic decision because first there was a militarisation of politics.' This new political order is a revolutionary model that hinges on a basic relation between a national leader (*caudillo*) and a popular mass, absolutely majoritarian, that designates him personally, as its representative, in order to carry out a broad, but above all a deep, process of change.

In the late summer and early autumn of 2000, Chávez began a campaign against the trade union federation (CTV or Confederación de Trabajadores de Venezuela) proposing the creation instead of a 'Bolivarian', 'revolutionary', and nationalist union movement linked to the regime. There was also extensive conflict over efforts to regulate private education and expand a 'revolutionary' curriculum for public schools, followed in early 2001 by a purge of the leadership of all cultural institutions in the name of the revolutionary process. This sequence will be familiar to anyone familiar with Latin American history.

*Thesis 2: Internal division (manifest in elite splits, party divisions, and defections) was more important than external pressure as a cause of regime decay*

Except in cases of war, regimes rarely fall to overwhelming external force. Internal division weakens regimes and institutions, and provides a sense of opening to potential oppositions. When a regime appears weak, groups that never would have thought they had a chance may take hope and reach for a piece of the action. Tarrow (1994) writes of cycles of protest, and notes the importance of the structure of political opportunities, chinks in the armour of regimes that make groups perceive an opening. Piven and Cloward (1998) take a different tack. They stress eruptions of violent protest more than organisation, and argue that the poor act in sporadic, violent outbursts precisely because they lack the capacity for long term organisation and must exploit short-term opportunities that arise. Once begun, violent protest further weakens regimes.

Lower stratum disruptive movements tend to emerge at junctures when larger societal 'changes generate political volatility and dealignments and new political possibilities. . . . the impact of protest during these periods is not simply that it contributes to subsequent coalition building and realignment. What needs to be understood is that disruptive protest itself makes an important contribution to elite fragmentation and electoral dealignment. Indeed, we think the role of disruptive protest in helping to create political crises (what we have called 'dissensus politics') is the main source of influence by lower status groups (Piven and Cloward, 1998: 367).

These insights fit the Venezuelan pattern of protest very well, and help explain why so much protest ended up with so little permanent organisation, and so great an attachment to, and dependence on, the leader: Chávez. The massive riots of February 1989 reflected the weakness of political institutions and further accelerated their decline. Parties and trade unions could not contain, much less anticipate, protest. This had been one of their major roles in the 'old regime' and it is clear the government of Carlos Andrés Pérez counted on its networks to contain protest, but when called on to do so, the networks turned out to be hollow shells.

Precisely how party networks decayed is not clear, but in general terms intra-party strife and what can only be called a 'betrayal of the elites' play a central role.

Divisions weakened both major parties. In AD, Carlos Andrés Pérez wrested the 1988 presidential nomination from a party controlled by his predecessor who favoured a different nominee. Pérez then marginalised the party both in campaigns and in the formulation and execution of public policy. When protests broke out, he looked to the party to save him, but the leadership was lukewarm, and the structures threadbare. The decay of AD was extended and reinforced throughout the 1990s by a seemingly endless parade of splits, defections and

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expulsions, ending in the ludicrous and pathetic expulsion of the party's 1998 candidate, Luis Alfaro Ucero, for being unwilling to stand aside and join the last-ditch anti-Chávez coalition gathering behind Enrique Salas Romer.<sup>2</sup> The other pillar of the old regime, the Christian Democratic party COPEI, had avoided serious division (although not expulsions) since its founding, but broke apart in a dispute over the 1998 presidential nomination. Former President and party founder Rafael Caldera took a large group of the party into his own movement, *Convergencia*. Caldera then won re-election in a four-way race. MAS (Movement to Socialism) backed Caldera and joined his government but divided over what to do about Chávez. The Radical Cause (*La Causa R*) which had grown powerfully in the early part of the decade, also divided over leadership issues, with an important group (now known as *Patria Para Todos*) aligning with Chávez.

These reflections suggest that one way to look at the party and group politics of the 1990s leading up to the election of Chávez is as a progressive fracturing and weakening of established groups at the national and local levels. Continuous tinkering with the electoral system contributed to fragmentation by creating incentives for local and regional initiatives, and changing the dynamics of power within the parties. The result is that when the Chávez candidacy began to pick up steam, in the six or eight months before the December 1998 elections, most older organisations were discredited, and there was little to hold voters to old loyalties.

### *Thesis 3: The collapse of the old regime reflects both Latin Americanisation and re-Venezuelanisation*

In the early 1990s, Venezuelans often talked about the 'Latin Americanisation' of the country. They were referring to the deadly mix of economic decline, inflation and the collapse of a once-solid currency, an obsession with the dollar, institutional collapse, political decay, resurgent personalist politics, the growing presence of the military and a surge in urban crime and personal insecurity. Latin Americanisation replaced openness and optimism with diffuse anger and a sense of betrayal, making Venezuelans feel like the 'virtuous victims of corruption and foreign interests' (Romero, 2000: 12) that were joined in a conspiracy to rob them of their national wealth. As the phrase suggests, 'Latin Americanisation' brings Venezuela closer to the stereotyped model of politics in the region, just as political trends in other countries have moved away from the old model: curbing the military, shrinking the state, introducing structural reform, and in general abandoning the populist style of politics. Alongside Latin Americanisation, there is a notable process of re-Venezuelanisation at work, returning the nation to classic patterns of political life.

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2 Alfaro had presided over so many expulsions that there was little sympathy for his fate. Indeed, one popular response was to mock the old saying that *adeco es adeco hasta que se muera* (An *adeco* is an *adeco* until he dies) with a new version that held that *adeco es adeco hasta que muera o si Alfaro quiera* (An *adeco* is an *adeco* until he dies, or until Alfaro kicks him out).

Consider the new prominence of the military. Until the advent of democracy in 1958, Venezuela was a classic model of foreign domination and military control. A central axis of the politics of the past century is the continuing struggle between the military and civilian forces for political control and legitimacy. The consolidation of democracy after 1958 suggested to many that the balance had swung decisively against the armed forces. But the events of the last decade indicate that this judgment was premature. Other elements of re-Venezuelanisation include the return of strong personalist leadership, and the reduction of social mobility and of trends to more equal income distribution (Levine, 1994; Ellner, 1997).

*Thesis 4: The anti-party lobby contributed to the decay of the old regime*

To speak of an anti-party lobby is not to suggest a conspiracy against the parties but rather to point to a widely acknowledged reality. Beginning in the mid 1980s, and gathering strength as shocks to the credibility and efficacy of the political system began to accumulate, a fierce barrage of criticism was directed at the major political parties, the electoral system, and the party system as a whole, which was widely characterised as a *partidocracia*. This lobby is made up of a loose collection of groups, ranging from institutional reformers and elements of a self-conscious 'civil society' to harsh critics of 'populism' and political activists seeking to lower barriers to organisation and political access. In an effort to promote a broader and less constrained kind of citizen participation, a steady stream of reform initiatives was promoted and implemented: decentralisation was strengthened and independent elections of governors and mayors were instituted, the electoral system was transformed, multiplying numbers and sites of elections and changing rules governing who could compete, and how (Molina, 1998); the number of offices up for election expanded many times over. Efforts were also made to regulate candidate selection, the internal workings of parties, and to reform party finances but these mostly fizzled out. Institutional reformers took a text-book view of reform, appearing, for example, to be surprised when voting *declined* rather than increased in local elections when they were at last available. They also designed complex multiple choice ballot systems which, for the large part, went ignored by voters. Critics of populism went further. Romero, for example, has long argued that populism was the prime source of the nation's troubles, spawning institutions and political practices that were irredeemably corrupt and grounded in patronage and that sustained a bloated and unresponsive leadership. Like the central character in a horror movie, Venezuelan democracy was dead but unburied, and in Romero's memorable phrase, reforms could never amount to more than 'rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic' (Romero, 1997).

Related criticisms of the party system came from the left, and from those arguing in the name of 'civil society'. For both, the parties were little more than dead weight, omnipotent and omnipresent structures whose unrelenting grip made it impossible for new leadership to surface, new ideas to get a hearing and

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new groups to be adequately represented (Urbaneja, 1992). The solution was to 'unleash' civil society, and the way to do this was to multiply political venues, lower the barriers to organisation, and make participation possible at many levels.

Such criticism helped undermine the legitimacy of the system at critical times. This is not to absolve the parties themselves or their leaders of responsibility for their own difficulties. Nor is it to suggest that critics should keep their mouths shut in the name of stability, the stability of something they detest. At issue is not so much the weakening of institutions as the lack of a clear and realistic vision of what might be put in their place. Much effort went in to undermining a set of institutions and practices with little serious thought given to what might replace them, not to mention to the possible consequences of their weakening. Continuous tinkering in an atmosphere of public criticism, fuelled by a very harsh opposition press, advanced powerfully by a coalition of public intellectuals, contributed to sapping the legitimacy of the system.

*Thesis 5. The way protest emerged in the 1990s weakened the old regime but at the same time was unlikely to generate viable or durable political alternatives*

Internal division provided an opening for new groups and counter elites but weakened the possibilities of their coalescing or consolidating into viable competitors for power on a large scale. Movements for reform in Venezuela are best understood as part of a broad wave of protest and pressure aimed at opening the political game or democratising democracy. Although mass discontent burst into public view with the 1989 riots, protest and public pressure involves more than disorder. The process has been continuous and widespread, cutting across social-class lines and breaching rules of the game that until then kept the management of politics pretty much in the hands of professional politicians and the parties they 'controlled'.

If we consider recent Venezuelan experience as a 'cycle of protest' a few points about decay and change become clear. Tarrow (1994: 156) states that in cycles of protest,

'What is distinctive about such periods is not that entire societies 'rise' in the same direction at the same time (they seldom do); or that particular population groups act in the same way over and over, but that the demonstration effects of collective action on the part of a small group of "early risers" triggers a variety of processes of diffusion, extension, imitation, and reaction among groups that are normally quiescent.'

The prehistory of Venezuela's cycles of protest has no single centre, no unique point of departure or controlling vehicle. Protests and challenges pop up here and there, not just in response to the 'exhaustion of the model' but also in search of voice, expression, and participation (Gómez Calcaño, 1998; Levine 1998).

It is as if a mirror were held up to the party system and the rules by which it lived. If we recall the centralised, hierarchical character of the party system and its reliance on heavily financed state-party links with powerful leaders making deals behind closed doors, the contrast is all the more striking. Protesters and reformers seek greater access and participation, and make their case in campaigns against corruption and elite impunity. They insist on accountability and demand transparency: deals concluded in public and accessible to public scrutiny. Nothing could be more contrary to the operating rules of the *puntofijista* system.

The protest cycle of the last decade or so draws on a long, and as yet, for the most part, unwritten history of organisation, communication, and the articulation of positions. New groups and informal networks were created, whose continuing social presence shaped new issues, and served as points of attraction that elicited citizen interest, gave experience in common action, and nurtured activism on a small scale. Networks of this kind are not proto-parties, but rather loose collections of individuals and groups. They provide a generative base for issues, a place for testing ideas and trying out strategies. Such networks are essential breeding grounds for change, but have serious difficulties surviving in conditions of scarcity and dependence on personalist leadership.

Built into the concept of civil society is the idea that groups and networks are less tied to state and party control than their predecessors, and this may be so. New networks and groups may indeed be less subordinate to state and party control than their predecessors, but they are by no means autonomous. They compete for resources and strive to find a foothold in 'the system'. They are vulnerable to cooptation and penetration by parties and state agencies. Moreover, members are commonly less concerned with broad political agendas than are the leaders who claim to speak in their name. The leap from concrete goals to a political 'project' is not an easy sell. One might argue that autonomy or authenticity are less important to sustaining protest than the conditions under which independent and viable groups have a chance to emerge and consolidate, and a capacity to act, in ways that can change the larger structures of politics.

The surge of protest in Venezuela during the 1990s has left very little behind in the way of enduring organisation. For Piven and Cloward (1998), such results are a consequence of the kind of actions open to most people in the circumstances of the time: costly and short term. The high costs of sustained collective action of *any kind* must also be noted. The pressure of economic crisis, of the daily struggle for survival in a competitive market where neoliberal reforms have gutted conditions of collective action, make common effort a far reach for many. The enthusiasm, voice, and surge of activism that comes with empowerment are not easy to sustain and commonly fail to translate into durable and effective organisations. There is no direct and easy relationship between empowerment and power.

The core of the problem is how to sustain empowerment in the absence of power, or even reliable allies. The evidence from Venezuela is ambiguous. Although the decay of parties sets groups free, in the same measure it sets them adrift and leaves them with dwindling resources, easy prey to manipulative

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leaders and personalist politics. Without strong and durable organisation, 'civil society' is unlikely to provide coherence and direction for a complex and conflict-ridden society. The kind of organisational volatility noted here leaves ordinary people very much at the mercy of a supposedly direct relation to the leader, in this case to Hugo Chávez. The difficulty is more than accidental. As constructed in Venezuela, the elements of civil society are unlikely to yield enduring organisation, and are indeed very likely to be dependent upon, and ultimately betrayed by, personalist elites as unaccountable as their populist predecessors.

This situation underlies the central thesis of Norberto Ceresole's *Caudillo, Ejercito, Pueblo* (1999). Ceresole argues that the direct, personal, physical relation of masses with the leader is critical to the kind of post-democratic legitimacy being constructed in Venezuela. In this new order of things, 'Power must remain concentrated, unified, and centralized. The people elect a person who is automatically projected into the meta-political plane, not an idea or a constitution. This is not an anti-democratic, but rather a post-democratic model.' Ceresole insists that his view is not anti-democratic but rather post-democratic, and transcends old style *caudillo* politics by virtue of its powerfully nationalist and popular character:

the mandate or popular order that transforms a leader into a national figure, with international projections, was expressed not only democratically, not only involving the preservation and independence of national culture, but also the transformation of structures (social, economic, and moral) (Ceresole, 1999: 7).

A sense of history, and the most minimal understanding of democratic politics, should make one wary of this argument. The absence of mediating structures like parties is at the same time an absence of continuity and control over the leader him/herself. Governments are increasingly personal, and the historical record of military populists like Chávez is not reassuring when it comes to sustained reform and political openness.

### *Thesis 6: Hugo Chávez Frías evokes Juan Perón, but also looks a lot like Cipriano Castro*

In practice and rhetoric, Hugo Chávez Frías evokes comparisons with a number of figures in modern Latin American history who have traced a path of military-populist leadership. With Chávez, figures like Juan Perón, Juan Velasco Alvarado, or Omar Torrijos share origins in the military, an inflamed discourse that engages powerfully nationalist, populist and class-related themes, the construction of a coalition that joins right and left, military, business, and militants in an uncomfortable juxtaposition, a drive to construct official unionism, making personal persistence in office and smashing alternative organisation a top priority, and an independent and 'radical' international stance (for Chávez, a warm approach to Cuba and expressions of solidarity).

There are differences as well. Chávez and his comrades failed to seize power

through a *coup d'état*, where Velasco Alvarado succeeded and Perón never tried. Perón came out of the military and led it into a coalition with labour; Velasco led a successful coup, and in power constructed a military-controlled 'revolution from above', mobilising peasantry and the urban poor. Both coalitions proved unsustainable, and in their wake, each country entered a long period of violence and decline. Perón's return to power in the mid 1970s was a disaster: he turned on the left, unleashed a wave of official violence, and then died. His successors continued the downward track, culminating in military adventurism and the 'dirty war' that scarred Argentina through the 1970s and 1980s. Velasco was followed by a more conservative military group which paved the way for a transition to democracy in 1980. But that democracy was plagued by rising tides of violence, triggered above all by Sendero Luminoso. Each regime engendered mobilisations and set in motion conflicts that underlay the subsequent extended political crises. We can be certain that President Chávez does not want to repeat these experiences, but his political strategy and the pattern of his alliances and rhetoric are disturbingly similar. Arvelo Ramos (1998: 33–51) identifies four elements in the Chávez coalition: a broad popular and democratic front; partisans of a military dictatorship; partisans of a revolutionary, 'leninist' regime; and 'revolutionaries of the party of government' (that is, elements in the MAS who sought to continue in power by allying with Chávez).

This unwieldy collection of forces evokes obvious parallels to Perón, above all in the mix of right and left, military officers and activist civilian radicals. But home-grown precedents also come to mind, for example Ciprano Castro. Castro was an outsider who captured Caracas (and what passed at that time for a national state) with a rag-tag Andean 'army' in 1899. He assumed office as a new figure, arguing for reform, including a bold new international stance. Castro soon became entangled with, and beholden to, the old Caracas elite and accomplished little. His international politics ended in disastrous foreign interventions and led to his ouster by Juan Vicente Gómez, who went on to lead a harsh and exceptionally thorough dictatorship for three decades. Chávez also recalls Cipriano Castro with his intense, defensive nationalism and appeal to the common man. Chávez has the physical look and uses the language of the common man. In her hero-worshipping book about the leaders of the February 4 coup, *La rebelión de los ángeles* (1992) [Rebellion of the Angels], Angela Zago (who later broke with Chávez) collected the following examples of popular poetry about the future President that suggest the kind of adulation in question here. The first is a bit of doggerel, the second a remarkable adaptation of the Lord's Prayer:

Hugo Chávez es mi nombre	Hugo Chávez is my name
Comandante de los 'alzaos'	Commander of the rebels
'Alzaos' par' los del gobierno	Rebels to the government
Patriota pa' mi pueblo hambreo	Heroes to my starving people
Yo nací en los mismos llanos	I was born in the same plains
De este pueblo pisoteao	as this downtrodden people



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Soy un turpial po' el pico  
Y un tigre por lo pintao  
Con una lanza en la mano  
Y un garrote encabullao

I can sing like a bird  
and I am a tiger by my stripes  
with a lance in my hands  
and a club ready to strike

*Oración a Chavez Nuestro*

Chávez nuestro que estás en la carcel  
Sanctificado sea tu golpe  
Venga (vengar) a nosotros tu pueblo  
Hágase tu voluntad  
La de Venezuela y la de tu ejército  
Danos hoy la confianza ya perdida  
No perdona a los traidores  
Asi como tampoco perdonaremos  
A los que te aprehendieron  
Sálvanos de tanta corrupción  
Y libranos de CAP  
Amen

Our Chávez who art in jail  
Blessed be your coup  
Come to (avenge) us your people  
Your will be done  
That of Venezuela and of your army  
Restore our lost confidence  
And do not forgive the traitors  
Just as we will not forgive  
those who captured you  
Save us from all the corruption  
and deliver us from CAP\*  
Amen

\* CAP refers to former president Carlos Andrés Pérez

These and similar creations draw on imagery and rhythms of speech familiar to all Venezuelans. Combined with posters and statues, T-shirts, dolls and complete camouflage outfits (now a popular Carnival costume for children), they express a pervasive anger and bitterness, search for vengeance, longing for change, and a readiness for hero worship that found little outlet in the old political system. Whatever the parallels that seem appropriate for Chávez, the implications are not encouraging. Juan Perón and Cipriano Castro both tried to manage heterogeneous coalitions that fell apart. Each paved the way for something much worse.

*Thesis 7: The left has adopted Chávez but has as much reason to fear him as any other sector*

This thesis rests on important historical parallels, not only to figures like Perón but also to a range of experiences in which leftist movements have hitched their star to alliances with the armed forces, only to be done in by them. The early rise of Acción Democrática to power, in the October 1945 *coup* engineered along with young military officers, is a case in point. The party's military allies ousted it from power after three years, ushering in ten years of dictatorship. The coalition of forces that has coalesced around Chávez Frías contains numerous elements of the Venezuelan left, both 'old and new', joined at the hip with military and business figures.

The left was marginalised throughout the *puntofijista* system, and saw Chávez as a ticket to power. In his campaigning and his service as President, it has become clear that Hugo Chávez is not simply a military man in search of occasional allies, but rather is a man of the left who happens to have been in the military. His key political allies are figures with established trajectories in the left, such as Jose Vicente Rangel, Luis Miquilena, or Pablo Medina, and he has relied heavily on a mix of leftists and military figures for the implementation of policies and programmes. The movement is perhaps best characterised as a personalist operation with strong leftist rhetoric and alliances: the key figure is and remains Chávez himself. The coalition is an unstable one, with potential for military dissent which has already manifested itself in many forums. Chávez has broken with a long string of former allies, including his comrades from the 1992 coup, and is now in the process of refounding his original movement.

*Thesis 8: The military logia founded around Hugo Chávez Frías did not arise in protest against political decay*

The *coup* of 4 February 1992 was not the result of an overnight decision, nor was it provoked in any direct way by reaction to the neoliberal reforms of President Carlos Andrés Pérez, nor did it stem from disgust at the use of the army in the violent and deadly suppression of the urban riots of February 1989. These and other elements doubtless brought individuals into the conspiracy but it is well established that the core group that led the coup began to coalesce at least ten years earlier (Zago 1992; Blanco Muñoz, 1998). The group MBR200 (Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario 200) formed as such, had a structure and leadership, met regularly over the years and recruited members from younger, better-educated officers in a widening, but still tightly-held circle of officers committed to the conspiracy. Major figures in the group, including Chávez were already under suspicion and being watched by counter intelligence well before the coup.

The fact that the group has a history that predates the early signs of political decay suggests that motives other than a reaction to corruption and bad government were at work here. Foremost among them were three: hyper-nationalism, including pressure for an assertive stance in border disputes with Colombia; an exaggerated cult of Bolívar that has now become all too familiar; and the influence of a particular brand of Latin American populist leftism young officers encountered in the universities (they were the first generation to take civilian degrees, for example in Political Science) and in higher military training institutes in courses taught by exiles from other Latin American countries. Among the writings in this genre that Chávez and others noted as influential are such classics of the Latin American left as Eduardo Galeano's *The Open Veins of Latin America* (1973).

*Thesis 9: The Bolivarian Constitution of 1999 is internally contradictory, but at a basic level reflects a continuing commitment to constitutional means of change in the country*

The discussion to this point has underscored significant anti-democratic elements in the theory and the practice of the Chávez movement and the new regime. From the beginning, Chávez centred his political agenda around the call for fundamental reform of the country's political institutions, to be achieved by a Constituent Assembly that would write a new Constitution. What does the Constitution of 1999 suggest about the future pattern of institutions and political life in Venezuela?

The persistence of constitutionalism is a striking characteristic of the Venezuelan crisis of the 1990s. Alongside continuous protest, occasional outbreaks of intense violence, and two attempted military coups, the actual working out of the crisis has been through legal and constitutional means. The impeachment and removal from office of Carlos Andrés Pérez is a case in point. Although constitutional experts can and did indeed differ on the proper attributes of the Constituent Assembly, its relation to the pre-existing Congress, and on specifics such as electoral rules or regulations of trade unions, the persisting emphasis on constitutionalism suggests the power of legality, and of working through legal/institutional frameworks. To be sure, it is the quality of that legal order, not its mere existence, that matters.

The Chávez-led drive for a new constitution was not the first such initiative in recent years. Various proposals for constitutional reform had been addressed in the Senate (in committees chaired by former President Caldera), and calls for a constituent assembly were a regular feature of the political debates in the crisis atmosphere following the two attempted coups of 1992. Constitutional reform, or better, the convening of a constituent assembly to draft an entirely new document, was widely referred to as giving oxygen to the system (*oxigenar el sistema*), as an essential step in re-legitimising the democratic system.<sup>3</sup> Setting aside for the moment the issue of possible defects in the 1961 Constitution, it is worth asking why so many hopes were pinned on this particular medium of change, and what the results have been. The exaggerated hopes placed on constitutional reform make sense as a reflection of the extraordinarily low credibility of existing institutions, the visible immobilism of the political class, and the sense that only something radically different might break the log jam.

The 1999 Constitution instituted a wide range of changes: some entail a basic restructuring of institutions, others continue and reinforce previous trends. The country was renamed the 'Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela' and the pattern of

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3 The run up to the Constituent Assembly and the new Constitution witnessed heated debate and some extravagant claims on the part of its proponents, for example that this was the only truly democratic Constitution in the country's history, or as Luis Miquelena put it 'the only Constitution that has not been clandestine.' All others in the nation's history, he argued, have been the product of narrow elites, 'the sacred cows of jurisprudence, the same wise men who led the country to ruin.' (*El Nacional*, 28 November 1999).

national institutions was overhauled: a unicameral National Assembly replaced the old two-chamber Congress and the office of Vice President was created, along with a council of state and a 'moral power', one of the key elements of Simón Bolívar's constitutional thought. Provision is made for one-time re-election of the President, whose term is lengthened to six years. At the most general level the Constitution contains provisions that enhance citizen rights and human rights generally, along with articles that reinforce the power and autonomy of the central government, the national executive, and the security forces. The makers of the 1999 constitution took advantage of this opportunity in several notable ways. The Constitution, and the rhetoric of the government, strongly underscore the importance of creating a participatory democracy (*democracia participativa*) (Molina, 2001). There is extensive provision for a referendum and recall of officials. These powers are not new in Venezuela, but it is fair to say that they now have much heightened status. Apart from recall and referendum, the call to create a participatory democracy has had little impact thus far on the form of institutions, although the draft documents for a National Educational Project include controversial provisions for the creation of citizen assemblies whose composition, mode of operation, and autonomy are as yet unclear (Rey, 1999). Elements of this kind are combined with provisions that do much to recentralise government and enhance the powers of the presidency (articles 225–37). The military is also made more autonomous and given a broad, constitutionally legitimate role in civil affairs (articles 322–32). Provision was also made for much-expanded emergency powers, and in general for an expanded role for the increasingly autonomous state security forces (Rey, 1999; Rey and Pabón 2000). The guiding role of the central state in the economy and in economic distribution is strongly underscored (articles 299–310) and the bases are laid for a kind of political system in which the role of parties is dramatically restricted. Subsequent reworking of electoral laws has made the electoral system itself considerably less representative (in the relation pattern of seats to votes) than was the case in the previous system. Whatever the outcome of specific electoral contexts, it seems clear that the forms and vehicles of political conflict are likely to differ in significant ways from those of the past. These considerations may make it possible for the new constitution to provide a framework for open politics, despite the authoritarian tendencies of some of its proponents.

*Thesis 10: The old system was not tainted at birth, not the most corrupt ever, and not 'not a real democracy'. Its passing deserves more than celebratory revenge*

Central to the political rhetoric of the Chávez movement and regime is the articulation of a case for revenge on the previous political system and its leaders as corrupt, inefficient, and isolated from the people. The foundational pacts of the old system left it tainted from birth: the only miracle is that it lasted as long as it did. As we have seen, this argument has a practical political expression and a theoretical academic expression. The new system will presumably be more democratic, and one knows this because the President and his political projects

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get wide popular support. The logic is that concentrating power around a transformative figure will effectively democratise it: the rest is window dressing. Ceresole states (1999: 32):

This is a unique process. The people of Venezuela generate a leader (*caudillo*). At the heart of power is the relation between the leader and the masses. This unique and special character of the Venezuelan process cannot be denied, ignored, or misinterpreted. The people give orders to a chief, a *caudillo*, military leader. He is obliged to obey these orders from the people. This is what lies at the heart of power. This is the essence of the model you have created. If it continues, then the process also continues its forward march; if it is broken, the process will decay and one of the most important experiences of recent decades will be eliminated. This is the relationship which must be defended at all costs. Therefore, it will be necessary to oppose by all possible means any effort that aims at 'democratising' the nature of power. The call to 'democratise power' has a very specific meaning in Venezuela today. It means liquifying power, gassing power, annulling power. I repeat: there is an explicit order given by a concrete people to a specific man. This is the greatness but also the weakness of the Venezuelan model.

If we have learned one thing from the political tragedies of Latin America over the past quarter century, it is surely that this view of politics has deadly consequences. It destroys institutions, makes ordinary people even more dependent on leaders than they are in most cases, demonises opponents and shrinks the political arena. The entire thrust of the return of civilian rule and the effective transformation of political forces, including the left, has been to reject this vision of the political order.

No serious observer suggests that the system was without flaws, nor that its leaders and institutions did not contribute in important ways to their own demise. But acknowledging flaws is a far cry from a root and branch condemnation that rewrites history to erase the hopes and the real achievements of a political order. After more than a decade of chronic 'crisis', Venezuela remains caught between the demise of the old system and a very uncertain future. The old rules no longer work, and the new rules are still untested. The political sphere has been transformed, and rhetoric, issues, and positions dramatically polarised. Soon the old times may not look so bad.

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