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Venezuela's Authoritarian Turn: From Institutional Foundations to Democratic Collapse

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***Abstract*—This article provides a comprehensive analysis of Venezuela's path to authoritarianism through the lens of institutional development and democratic decline. The analysis traces how democratic institutions established after 1958 were built on fundamentally flawed foundations, elite capture, personalism, clientelism, and exclusion, which created structural weaknesses systematically exploited after Hugo Chávez's rise to power in 1998. Rather than attributing authoritarianism exclusively to external economic factors, this article demonstrates how the democratization process could not overcome the institutional limitations resulting from the Puntofijo system, ultimately succumbing to deliberate strategies by Chávez and Maduro to concentrate power and reduce democratic constraints.**

***Keywords*—Venezuela, authoritarianism, institutional decay, democratic decline, autocratization, Puntofijo Pact, Chávez, military authoritarianism & democratic deconsolidation**

This work reflects on the institutional crisis in Venezuela a complex process marked by successive advances and setbacks, wherein society's patience has been tested by a succession of deficient and misguided governments representing a political model stubbornly resistant to social pressures, until eventually causing their exhaustion. The Venezuelan experience reveals how institutional frameworks, nominally designed to facilitate democratic governance, became mechanisms of elite domination and control, ultimately contributing to the very authoritarian outcomes they ostensibly opposed.

Venezuelan institutions emerged under the influence of political personalism that has characterized its republican history, conditioning them from their inception to serve the interests of political power. If the institutional phenomenon is understood as the "structuring and domination of individual and group agency by structural determinants in general", as Goodin (2003) suggests, it becomes readily understandable that the political class sought to influence the institutional system to maintain political and social control. The distinction between institutions as neutral venues for democratic practice and institutions as vehicles for elite interests proves crucial in understanding Venezuela's political trajectory.

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Following Goodin's definition, Venezuelan institutions represent "a pattern of recurring, valuable and stable behavior"(2003, p. 37), mechanisms or devices designed to guarantee the maintenance and balance in State-society relations while, in practice, preserving class interests. The institutional system can be transformed through social change, which may be accidental, evolutionary, or intentional (Goodin, 2003). Institutions represent the rules of the game of a society through which necessary corporate accommodations are developed to allow social exchange based on incentives the system itself defines. In theory, institutions should promote structures that significantly reduce uncertainty in individual decision making; however, the institutional framework in Venezuela proved more subject to political-partisan interests than to genuine social expectations. This fundamental contradiction would shape Venezuela's institutional crisis and ultimate democratic decline.

The purpose of this article is to examine the institutional crisis in depth through reflections on the different episodes that fed Venezuelan institutional exhaustion, undertaken by reconstructing the complex relations between the State and its institutions. Understanding this trajectory requires moving beyond simplistic monocausal explanations to appreciate how structural institutional weaknesses, combined with elite intransigence and political miscalculation, created conditions for authoritarian transformation. The analysis proceeds through a chronological and analytical lens, examining how the apparent stability of the Puntofijo system concealed fundamental legitimacy deficits that eventually rendered the democratic regime vulnerable to authoritarian displacement.

Causes of the Venezuelan Institutional Crisis

The Venezuelan institutional crisis, understood as the exhaustion of the political, economic, and social model imposed by the founding political elite through their conception of consensual democracy, has its origins in the very nature of the Venezuelan political system's constitution and the fundamental contradictions embedded within it. The consensus upon which the Puntofijo Pact was constructed proved far narrower and more fragile than its architects acknowledged, resting upon economic rents that would eventually prove unsustainable and

upon political arrangements that excluded vast segments of society from meaningful participation.

The unequal distribution of wealth led to a strong social crisis, deepening the gap between the dominant and the dominated in ways that the political system proved structurally incapable of addressing. The political sector maintained deliberate distance from the budding social conflict, treating demands for redistribution and participation as threats to systemic stability rather than as legitimate claims requiring response. In 1984, an attempt was made to correct the structural failures of the State through the creation of the Presidential Commission for the Reform of the State (COPRE) by presidential decree. This body, composed of recognized intellectuals and professionals with extensive national experience, produced important diagnoses regarding state weaknesses and substantive proposals for overcoming existing imbalances. COPRE's contributions covered all areas of national development; however, implementation was far from being a priority for the political class in power, which exhibited considerable resistance to the commission's creation and later to the execution of the proposed reforms.

In this correlation of forces, repression emerged as the most effectiveand preferredmeasure to roll back attempts to violate political class dominance, paradoxically enabling the persistence of social conflict rather than resolving it. Symptoms of disconnection appeared in political behavior; in the 1988 elections, for example, there occurred a notable increase in historical electoral abstention, signaling fundamental shifts in popular sentiment toward the regime.

The relatively high abstention rate in the presidential and legislative elections of December 1988 was one of the warning signs regarding citizen discomfort with the political system. Calculated on the universe of voters, it reached 25.39 % approximately 13 % higher than in the 1983 presidential elections. This represented a significant departure from established patterns and suggested deep currents of dissatisfaction beneath the surface stability. As Sonntag and Maingón (1992) observe, "This initial cracking of the democratic electoral rite was transformed into a silent protest... that found its voice on February 27, 1989"(p. 66). The Caracazo would demonstrate that these electoral signals reflected genuine mass discontent capable of mobilization.

This change in the relationship schemereflected in the traditional variation of abstention at 7.82 % (Francés, 1990, p. 184) compared to the previous 20 yearsrepresented a consequence of the absence of consensus between the State and social forces in conflict regarding the political project, producing an imbalance in State-society relations that would continue deteriorating. Under these conditions, a rearrangement of political and social forcesseeking either to maintain class privileges or to displace the ruling class from powerbecame indispensable. Alternative political movements emerged; certain church sectors assumed a vanguard role; and an unfavorable opinion matrix began forming against the established political order. The old political settlement, which had survived multiple crises, faced a challenge of unprecedented scope.

From a chronological perspective, the institutional crisis manifested clearly in 1989 as an indicative moment of concrete facts affecting Venezuelan democratic institutionality and revealing the regime's fundamental vulnerabilities. The first warning signs of the political system's crisis occurred during the social explosion of February and March 1989, known as the Çaracazo,"which marked the beginning of a series of politically significant events that would increasingly challenge regime legitimacy. The Caracazo was not merely an economic protest or a spontaneous outburst; it represented the breakdown of the implicit social contract that had maintained regime stability for three decades.

Carlos Andrés Pérez's election to the presidency for a second time generated substantial expectations regarding his first government (1974–1979), when oil wealth had enabled significant social spending. However, displays of waste during his assumption of officeincluding extravagant inaugural ceremoniesleft sectors of the country deeply concerned. One month after assuming power, on February 27, 1989, following increases in gasoline prices and consequently in public transport fares, the most dramatic social explosion in contemporary Venezuelan history erupted. As part of the economic package applied within the International Monetary Fund (IMF) agreement, the economic recovery measures implemented by the government had a shock effect on the population, creating immediate hardship for large segments of society. Former President Rafael Caldera later observed before Congress on March 1: "You cannot ask the people to sacrifice if an example of austerity is not set... because telling the people to tighten their belts while they observe displays of waste is almost a slap in the face; the reaction is extremely harsh"(Caldera, 1992, p. 28). This severe reading of national conditions fundamentally altered the nation's political reality and exposed the fragility of elite consensus.

This event served as a warning and indicator of the ongoing institutional crisis that could no longer be hidden or managed through conventional political means. Although President Pérez attempted to minimize damage through various administrative measures, the institutional fracture was evident; the political discourse no longer convinced popular sectors or, importantly, segments of the political and military elite. The measures undertaken revealed the unexpected nature of these events for the political class, surprised by

the behavior of the popular classesan attitude consistent with the democratic political model that Uslar characterized as fundamentally falsified. Uslar (1992) argued: "Much of what has happened in Venezuela cannot be explained except in light of the very peculiar form that, due to circumstances, democratic institutions have acquired since 1958, the result of which has been the inefficiency and falsification of what said institutions should have been and of the democratic game"(p. 121). This penetrating observation captured how institutions designed for democratic governance had become mechanisms of domination and exclusion.

The reactions of the Venezuelan political system, by contrast, proved remarkably timid given the magnitude of the crisis and its threat to regime survival. The political-administrative decentralization process initiated in 1989 was interpreted as a reaction of the systema protective measure of a political nature in response to the institutional crisis's impact, understood as the ineffectiveness of the behavioral rules governing political and social actors. However, this response, while addressing some of the forms through which the crisis manifested, failed to address its underlying causes in the legitimacy deficits of the regime itself.

This limited effectiveness manifested most clearly in the representativeness crisis evident in the inability to articulate society's diverse demands; clientelism replaced genuine participation, and society was systematically excluded from public decisionscircumstances that incipient decentralization failed to correct and in some ways exacerbated. More seriously, the political class exhibited pronounced reluctance to rectify these fundamental issues, instead hoping to manage crisis through incremental reforms. Leadership and political parties lost an opportunity to recover their standing after the 1989 events; instead of genuine institutional reform, they pursued damage control. The distance between society and politics had widened considerably between 1984 and 1989 (García M., 2002, p. 24), reflecting the accumulation of unmet demands and broken promises.

As long as the system maintained the power relations scheme outlined by democracy's foundational basesthe elite consensus around controlled democratic governanceredefining the system was deemed unnecessary by those who benefited from existing arrangements. This strategic blindness proved fatal, as it failed to anticipate that the popular reaction would so completely overwhelm regime defenders. However, the imbalance was now exposed, as the revolt repeated in cities beyond the capital Caracas, raising ongoing discussion about whether any coordinating organization guided the mobilization, given the similarity of behaviors in different localities where looting and protest occurred simultaneously across the country. This decentralized character of the uprising suggested widespread rather than orchestrated discontent.

The Pérez government could not reverse its application of the economic package required by the IMF as part of adjustment measures, despite the obvious social costs of such policies. This represented traditional political class behavior-demanding that popular classes concede to crisesbehavior contradicting his presidential campaign discourse, in which he had explicitly criticized international financial organization policies. The shock measures caused serious imbalances in both the population and the political system, straining regime legitimacy further. The political parties, rather than assuming responsibility for the regime's crisis, blamed subversion and destabilizing exogenous factors, offering vague promises of change without substantive proposals. The government, for its part, deployed the repressive apparatus to contain protests, raising human rights concerns that would continue to delegitimize the regime. To this date, the exact death toll from those three days of collective revolt remains unknown, a lack of accountability that itself testified to the regime's disregard for popular welfare.

The business community, constituting the principal source of support for the adjustment implementation of the measures, jointly decided with the CTV (the main labor confederation) the day following the social outbreak to implement general salary and wage increases, a concession that implicitly acknowledged the reality of mass discontent. The CTV, meanwhile, distancing itself from ADthe party exercising influence over the principal workers unionexpressed disagreement with the economic package but failed to articulate discourse connecting with popular class situations, resulting in a form of "diplomatic opposition"that satisfied neither the workers nor the government. The Church attempted to direct its message around civic protest intentions, demanding violence cessation and genuine willingness to consider the social problem in its true dimensiona moral stance that the government largely ignored. The Armed Forces, as the repressive apparatus, bore responsibility for exercising coercion to suppress the uprising and preserve the system. However, precisely this task generated contradictions within the military institution, since the grievances evident in the masses causes were not foreign to the military componentparticularly to those required to suppress the uprising on streets where many of their relatives lived. This episode would later exert notable influence on Venezuelan institutional crisis development, planting seeds of military discontent that would flower in subsequent years.

Clearly, neither the government nor economic groups were convinced of the need to implement measures with social content that would mitigate the impact of unfavorable economic measures on significant population sectors. While parties, FEDECAMARAS, and the CTV maintained their own agen-

das, the Church and Armed Forces pursued different courses regarding the existing crisisdifferences that would become evident in subsequent events and would fundamentally alter the regime's stability.

Characteristics of the Venezuelan Institutional Crisis

To understand the institutional crisis's dimensions, which manifested more clearly from 1989 onward, one must examine its connection to the Venezuelan political system's fundamental nature and the structural contradictions embedded within it. The breaking of obedience to the political consensus deepened the social gap, as political discourse failed to articulate with popular sectors, thereby ignoring the institutional pact that had prevailed for 30 years and upon which regime stability had rested. The implicit social contractwherein popular classes accepted elite domination in exchange for material benefits and the appearance of representationhad been broken by austerity policies that sacrificed popular welfare to financial orthodoxy.

The economic crisis and its consequent social crisis proved insufficient to motivate changes in political class-popular sector relationships; instead, they became serious threats to democratic governance, exposing the institutional system's inability to channel demands and create mechanisms to recover consensual model foundations. This failure of representationcombined with the regime's apparent inability or unwillingness to address fundamental inequalitiescreated conditions wherein alternative political projects, including authoritarian ones, began appearing attractive to segments of the electorate and elite.

The institutional crisis manifested through four interconnected indicators, each reinforcing the others in a vicious cycle of delegitimization:

Crisis of values. The moral and ethical principles supporting political exercise became profoundly distorted in the Venezuelan political system's relational model. Political class interests superseded popular class interests in a manner that became increasingly transparent and undefendable. The representativeness crisis that would later manifest resulted from this fundamental disagreement, wherein the system lost credibility among its subjects. Political leaders ceased even pretending to serve public interest and openly pursued private enrichment, a cynicism that was deeply corrosive to regime legitimacy.

Absence of leadership. Leadership in Venezuela became connected exclusively to the personalistic exercise of political power, born from the caudillista model that had characterized the nation's republican history. This personalist emphasis remained unabated despite democratic forms, as Venezuelan politics continued to revolve around individual strongmen rather than institutional structures or programmatic visions. The leader figure remained tied to personal power exercise, far from serving as a role model for democratic commitment or civic virtue.

Corruption. The lack of moral values expressed itself practically in political class behavior regarding public resource management. A culture of illicit enrichment emerged across the political spectrum, evident in notorious scandals within public administration. The wealth notion resulting from the oil businessthe sense that Venezuela's resources were essentially infinitenotably influenced politicians and power-adjacent factors ambitions. Political clientelism also found expression through corruption cases, with the Sierra Nevada scandal serving as exemplary. During Carlos Andrés Pérez's first government (1974–1979), the ship "Ragni Berg", renamed "Sierra Nevada", was acquired at an overpriced amount of US $8 million, for which the president was eventually prosecuted. At his constitutional mandate's end, he received acquittal from moral and administrative responsibility, though he carried a political conviction. This outcomeappearing to reward wrongdoingfurther damaged regime credibility.

Loss of legitimacy. Consensual democracy had allowed institutional control to remain in political elite handsspecifically, in the hands of partisan leaders within the traditional political parties (AD and COPEI). The State apparatus functioned as a political party instrument designed to protect their interests; thus, its fundamental partisanship expanded the political elite's action field while narrowing the political space available to challengers. The fundamental democracy institutions political penetration made articulating society's interests contingent upon channeling demands through patron-client networks. This further deepened the political class-popular sector gap, creating a widening chasm between rulers and ruled. Political parties began losing representativeness in genuine terms, and consequently, the political system itself became increasingly delegitimized. Institutionality ceased being perceived as a legitimate space in terms of behavior acceptance; Justice and Congress became objects of permanent societal criticism and cynicism. Democratic guarantees offered by the political system were systematically replaced by mistrust and institutional questioning.

These four characteristics reflected a relational model's exhaustion, wherein the political elite had lost its capacity to lead society through consent, having privileged defending its own interests over those of popular classes. Policies undertaken to correct these imbalancesthe political-administrative decentralization process and the direct election of Mayors and Governors (1989)would ultimately prove insufficient to restore system legitimacy. These reforms, though representing genuine innovations in Venezuelan institutional design, came

too late and were implemented too half-heartedly to reverse the delegitimization process already well underway.

The decentralization process, initiated with promulgation of the Organic Law of Decentralization, Delimitation and Transfer of Competences (Official Gazette 4153, 1989), had limited development precisely because central power maintained resistance to its full development, producing political, administrative, and territorial decentralization but notably not financial decentralization (Ley Orgánica de Descentralización, 1989). Decentralization served as the political instrument to rebuild fragmented institutionality following February and March 1989 events, but without the financial resources to make it meaningful, it remained largely symbolic.

The direct election of Mayors and Governors in December 1989 allowed regional and local leader selection for the first timean attribution previously belonging exclusively to the national president. This represented a genuine, if limited, democratic innovation and formed part of the State reform proposal developed by COPRE, which had to advance given the acute political circumstances confronting the regime. In these December 1989 elections, a phenomenon indicative of approaching crisis manifested starkly: electoral abstention reached approximately 55 % (Sonntag & Maingón, 1992, p. 69), reflecting the political class-popular sector relationship's fundamental deterioration. An abstention rate of this magnitude indicated not mere apathy but active repudiation of the political system itself.

Abstention could be interpreted as a system responsea sign of distrustbut in any case, lack of institutional credibility intensified. Furthermore, economic policy changed little despite rhetorical commitments to reform; privatization processes began, with the most important being those of the National Telephone Company of Venezuela (CANTV) and the Venezuelan International Aviation Company (VIASA), seriously questioned by sectors adverse to Pérez's second government's economic measures and viewing them as betrayals of national patrimony. The fiscal deficit underwent correction through currency devaluation mechanisms and reductions in social spending, imposing severe sacrifice quotas on popular classes already suffering from economic crisis. High inflation rates alongside stagnant or declining salaries, deficient basic public serviceseducation and health declining in qualityconfigured a severe crisis picture that necessitated fundamental State-society relations redefinition.

Policies undertaken to correct these structural imbalances constituted merely timid temporary responses; the political elite demonstrated its unwillingness or inability to implement deeper reforms. Certain intellectual and non-governmental sectors raised serious questions regarding the state apparatus and the political class's capacity to govern. The warning revolved around imminence of democratic exhaustion as a prelude to chaos, whose anticipation had been the Caracazo, which could potentially trigger a military coup d'état. In 1991, a group of intellectuals called Los Notablesincluding Arturo Uslar Pietri, Ernesto Mayz Vallenilla, Miguel Ángel Burelli Rivas, and José Vicente Rangel, among otherswarned explicitly of Venezuelan democracy's precarious situation, emphasizing the necessity for emergency measures. The political crisis's seriousness was undeniable, partly due to the power vacuum resulting from President Pérez's loss of political supportnot only were traditional political organizations opposed to his policies, but also significant sectors within his own AD party expressed dissatisfaction. The economic sector remained out of tune with the regime, excepting the financial sector, which benefited substantially from the economic package. The CTV and Church exerted pressure demanding social crisis resolution measures, highlighting the tension created by the regime's refusal to address legitimate popular grievances.

Protests and strikes registered in 1991 reached 727; in 1992, 987 street actions (Romero, 1993, p. 152), a frequency indicating the persistence and intensification of social conflict. Consequently, repression intensified, and the country's situation reached serious extremes regarding class conflict conditions that had become unsustainable for the sectors involved in governance and increasingly for the military called upon to suppress dissent.

Corruption cases clarified the political class-popular class distance and deepened popular sector resentment. Mistrust in justice administration deepened due to weakness in punishing public officials involved in malicious acts and the perception that elites enjoyed immunity from accountability. As the situation deteriorated, the Government's discourse became increasingly disconnected from popular class needs, with no immediate decisions supporting the difficult economic situation of unprotected sectors. As Uslar (1992) argued, "It is the very falsification of democratic institutions that has contributed to widening the gap between political leadership and the popular classes"(p. 121). This observation identified the fundamental contradiction: institutions nominally democratic had become mechanisms of elite domination.

Socio-Political Effects of the Institutional Crisis

In these profoundly unbalanced conditions, the first of two military insurrections occurred in 1992, representing a dramatic rupture in elite consensus regarding the regime's viability. Warnings about coup possibilities had consistently reflected military institution discomfort and internal divisions in 1991. Some sectors alerted about violent exit possibilities absent political leadership changes and genuine institutional reform.

Political rectification calls, especially following the Caracazo, had gone systematically unheeded, creating propitious conditions for military insurrection. The military, traditionally the regime's enforcer, now began questioning whether defending this particular institutional arrangement served national or even military institutional interests.

The coup attempt carried out by the Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement 200 (MBR-200) on February 4, 1992, generated important mobilization given its considerable sociopolitical repercussions and the symbolic significance it carried. The military action deepened the political regime's fracture, exposing rupture with the military institution a fundamental ally upon which consensual democracy had depended for enforcement of elite consensus. The coup represented not merely an internal military rebellion but a fundamental questioning of regime legitimacy by a state institution itself.

The Pérez government's political base cracked substantially under the coup's impact, along with the institutional pact assumptions that had remained in force, with ups and downs, for the preceding 34 years. The political elite's task became political system reconstruction through new consensus, considering involved sectors expectationsa task that would prove far beyond their collective capacity. The political crisis was increasingly perceived as a problem the ruling elite could not solve through conventional means. Public powers faced questioning regarding their lack of assertiveness in responses and their apparent paralysis before fundamental institutional challenges. The system, harassed by demand overload and the loss of legitimacy, representativeness, and credibility, was insufficient to produce political party behavior change they remained more concerned with maintaining class privileges than with systemic survival.

The economic crisis worsened considerably following the coup attempt; implemented measures had already eroded Venezuelans' quality of life severely, with adjustment burdens falling disproportionately on popular sectors while ignoring this's social cost or necessity. Oil income proved insufficient to support the high inflation rate, national currency devaluation, and purchasing power loss three conditions creating compounding hardship for poor and working Venezuelans. The social crisis reflected the same institutional crisis the precariousness of values exhibited in the nation's political leadership and the economic crisis. The absence of articulation spaces for demands; low wages and salaries; unemployment; inflation; and poor public services caused popular sectors to reject the crisis political order fundamentally.

The coup action found justification in the government and political class's inability to implement efficient responses to Venezuelan democracy's institutional crisis. The insurgents claimed responsibility for subverting the political order, raising ideological flags of patriotic inspiration drawn from Simón Bolívar, Ezequiel Zamora, and Simón Rodríguez national heroes whose legacy suggested democratic and egalitarian commitments. This military incursion's effects could be observed through several institutional and social dimensions.

Political parties. As on February 27, 1989, the 4F was unexpected for political leadership, catching them unprepared to respond effectively. Their behavior oriented more toward maneuvers preserving elite interests than achieving policies correcting the political system's structural flaws. Political parties distanced themselves from their ostensible role as societal demand articulators; instead of rebuilding their leadership, they deepened the popular sector gap through defensive posturing.

The status quo political parties condemned the coup attempt, accusing involved military of seeking to establish dictatorial regime and violate democratic constitutionalityironies given their own recent violations of constitutional principles through unresponsive governance. In AD (the government party), discourse became disoriented and inconsistent. In the National Congress, during a special session to agree on the Guarantees Suspension Decree, Senator for Life Dr. Rafael Caldera (COPEI) initiated debate motivated by the need to reflect on events, highlighting the moment's seriousnessnot because of the crisis itself, which would be redundant, but because of the absence of popular support for democratic defense. He stated: "...this is what worries me most and hurts me, that I do not find in popular sentiment the same enthusiastic, determined and fervent reaction for democracy defense that characterized people's conduct in all painful incidents endured after January 23, 1958"(Caldera, 1992, p. 37).

In contrary position, Senator David Morales Bello (AD) strongly accused insurgents, pointing out their intention to assassinate the Republic President, calling for coup plotters' death. COPEI condemned the coup, coinciding with assassination attempts. MAS followed traditional parties' line, indicating the attempted coup caused serious country damage, fracturing Armed Forces unity. CAUSA R censured the attempt but likewise argued for economic and social policy rectification necessity, with deputy Aristóbulo Istúriz supporting Caldera's words, as did the PCV. The government focused its discourse on the President assassination attempt, describing coup plotters as mercenaries intending to replace the democratic regime with authoritarian government (Sonntag & Maingón, 1992, p. 23). Subsequently, the executive's position accused rebels of attacking the Constitution and laws.

Entrepreneurship. FEDECAMARAS, CONINDUSTRIA, FEDEINDUSTRIA, the Banking Association, Binational Chambers, and major private groups' positions despite diffe-

rences expressed support for democratic regime defense, identifying it as the only system guaranteeing free economic play and their interests. The sector supported the government and, consequently, economic measures, considering them necessary for economic stability recovery, at least in the short term.

CTV. The workers' union position followed the party line (AD), condemning the President assassination attempt and the frustrated coup, calling coup plotters anti-democratic in rhetoric while maintaining economic policy criticisms. They emphasized undertaking change necessity to preserve the democratic regime, though they possessed limited capacity to enforce such change.

Catholic Church. Fulfilling a national spokesperson mission in a predominantly Catholic country, the Church assumed its moral force role. The ecclesiastical hierarchy, through the Venezuelan Episcopal Conference (the highest Catholic institution body), upheld the democratic political regime's maintenance necessity, pointing out the urgency of revising its guiding principles and emphasizing the necessity for social development to overcome social depression, calling on the political class to assume genuine commitment to popular welfare.

National Armed Forces. The coup attempt exposed military institutions' fundamental internal fracture. Intermediate officers involved in the coup disregarded Military High Command authority by revolting against constituted powers. Beyond the offense committed, the Armed Forces' honor was violated, creating internal resentments. Defense Minister Fernando Ochoa Antich rejected general military institution descriptions, correctly noting that a sector rather than the entire Armed Forces participated in the rebellion, reiterating his commitment to defending democracy while acknowledging the seriousness of internal military divisions.

Popular sectors. Most Venezuelan people watched the armed insurrection passively, neither mobilizing in defense of the regime nor supporting the insurgents. There were no demonstration supporting rebels, but neither was there massive condemnation. The attempt occurred during deep social conflict when significant segments of the population had expected an exit from the crisis. What most surprised political and social scientists was the people's apparent apathy before the rebellion a response suggesting that neither pole of this elite conflict (regime or insurgents) represented genuinely popular interests. The silence indicated not consent but alienation.

The events during the 4F largely reflected government and political party disorientation regarding situation control and the options available. Initially, official discourse used disqualification to minimize MBR-200 action impact, represented by Lt. Col. Hugo Chávez Frías. The Armed Forces became targets of extensive persecution amid the current Guarantees Suspension; figures from the 1960s subversive struggle faced renewed persecution; media outlets such as Zeta magazine and El Nacional newspaper were raided; media censorship and self-censorship occurred: El Diario de Caracas and Economía Hoy saw reduced publication. An event sharpening military sphere tensions was retired military officers' pronouncement. In a document published in a major newspaper, they pointed out "the political leadership's inability to combat corruption... in short, that the Constitution and the country's laws establish postulates are fulfilled..."(Public document, El Nacional, 1992). This was not justification for the coup attempt; rather, the intention was to hold the leading political class responsible for its political leadership inability and moral failures.

The latent threat of new military incursions, threatening to break the constitutional thread and impose authoritarian rule, forced the executive to implement emergency measures. On February 26, 1992, President Pérez swore in the Consultative Council, composed of Pedro Pablo Aguilar, Ruth de Krivoy, Domingo Maza Zavala, José Melich Orsini, Pedro Palma, Pedro Rincón Gutiérrez, Julio Sosa Rodríguez, and Ramón J. Velásquez, commissioned to conduct an emergency study on corrective measures to implement for solving the country's fundamental problems (Diario El Nacional, 03/20/1992, Nº 1192). The document contemplated measures in the following orders: (a) Ethical-moral character addressing corruption; (b) Constitutional reform; (c) Armed Forces reconstruction addressing internal well-being; (d) Judicial reform to clean up the justice system; (e) Border problems; (f) Economic and social crisis through recovery and better redistribution; (g) Education; (h) Health; (i) Decentralization stimulation; (j) Public services improvement.

On March 10, an agreement was reached between AD and COPEI, establishing the Social-Christian parties cabinet entry: Humberto Calderón Berti (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and José Ignacio Moreno (Venezuelan Investment Fund), both economic measures supporters (Sonntag Maingón, 1992, p. 54). The agreement broke in June that same year due to damage the Pérez government accompaniment was causing COPEI, originally intended as a conciliation mechanism that proved unworkable in practice. Privatization income allowed the government to allocate approximately 4 billion dollars for a social megaproject execution including education, health, and other public services sectors. These measures were widely interpreted as political class moves to buy time and manage crisis, since neither the Consultative Council observations were applied nor would the social megaproject contribute by itself to resolving the serious institutional and economic crisis.

From that moment onward, an opinion matrix began generating, pressing for the Republic President's departure. In-

tellectuals of Uslar Pietri's caliber and politicians like Caldera asked Pérez to allow, through his power departure, the country's reconstruction beginning, echoing these sentiments that gained support from other important sectors. Public opinion increasingly favored the President's removal from office; according to pollster Omnimagen, 70 % of Venezuelans agreed with his resignation (Diario El Nacional, 1992). An urgent constitutional reform's realization was widely received, generating mobilization around Constituent Assembly convening possibility. Changes were planned, but political will remained necessary to make them operational. The Congress Bicameral Commission, chaired by Dr. Rafael Caldera, offered a Constitutional Reform project contemplating, among other changes, the Recall Referendum figure of the political mandate a potentially democratizing innovation.

However, while the February 4th coup attempt images remained fresh in public memory, on November 27, 1992, a second military insurrection took place, this time led by Navy and Aviation sectors, organized as the July 5 Movement (M5J). Coup rumors had not ceased in months following 4F, with coup plotters maintaining similar claims as their predecessors, differing in organizational nature and composition. High-ranking officials participated this time, together with civilians conspiring to overthrow the Pérez government, representing a potentially more serious threat. However, this could have been their coup incursion's weakness, since the government, alerted by intelligence and denunciations, possessed response capacity and was forewarned.

The M5J leaders were. Rear Admiral Hernán Gruber Odremán, Rear Admiral Luis Cabrera Aguirre, General Francisco Visconti Osorio, and Colonel Higinio Castro. The rebels' arguments fundamentally concerned the country's problems: social crisis, democratic institution degradation, injustice, and President Pérez government rejection. Their position was assuming constitutional order defense responsibility "...systematically violated by the Pérez Government"(Gruber, 1993, p. 135). This insurrectionary movement was considerably more violent than 4F, since the government possessed response capacity and alerted military units could mount effective resistance. The confrontation reached execution extremes; as Gruber points out regarding Lieutenant Luis Magallanes, commanding a Bronco aircraft shot down while crashing into La Carlota airport's (Caracas) runway to avoid further damage. "He saved his life by ejecting, and yet they shot him when he parachuted down..."(Gruber, 1993, p. 156), clearly violating the Geneva Convention. Attacks occurred against the Miraflores Palace, the Maracay Aviation School, and the headquarters of the General Sectoral Directorate of Intelligence and Prevention Services (DISIP). Overall, it was an aggressive action finding no population support, suggesting that military insurrection, whatever its claims, held little appeal to popular sectors. The aerial confrontation was bloody, and civilian images negatively influenced the population's military insurrection perception, wherein the government possessed ability to influence media narrative. DISIP found that "the National Guard Unit recovering Channel 8, Venezolana de Televisión (VTV), made excessive force use, thereby causing allegedly surrendered personnel death, as demonstrated by the shots from 'grace given on the head to deceased personnel'"(Gruber, 1993, p. 240).

The government's attempt reactions proved aggressive. Patriotic Front and Los Notables members faced arrest, including Manuel Quijada and José Antonio Cova. Persecutions intensified, generating internal tensions in the military, deepening military divisions.

The political parties rejected the coup attempt and violence incitement; their main concern was holding regional elections on December 6. FEDECAMARAS's position was condemnation of the military insurrection and support for the democratic political system. The CTV reiterated the democratic regime defense, rejecting any violation attempts. The Catholic Church called for rectification and social peace. The insurrection's generated effects were used by the government to promote voting stimulation campaigns; however, electoral abstention rates reached approximately 65 % (Rangel, 1993, p. 1-5)a stunning rejection that revealed the depth of popular alienation from electoral processes. Fraud accusations were numerous, and several processes had to be repeated in 1993, including in Lara and Barinas states, after arduous struggles and Supreme Court of Justice decisions.

The political crisis continued worsening, especially with the accusation made against President Pérez of obtaining preferential dollars 250 million bolivars from the security expenses item of the Ministry of Interior Relations, through a Differential Exchange Regime (RECADI) office operation. This complaint, filed on March 12 by the Republic's Attorney General, Dr. Ramón Escovar Salom, triggered an investigation that finally, on May 20, 1993, after considerable pressure, the Supreme Court of Justice approved the President Pérez prosecution request, finding sufficient merits with a vote of 9 in favor and 6 abstentions. President Pérez was temporarily replaced by Congress President Dr. Octavio Lepage, while political forces struggled to agree on who would be in charge of ending the constitutional period.

The chosen successor was Senator Dr. Ramón J. Velásquez, of the AD party, sworn in on June 5, 1993. His image and trajectory gave guarantees of the necessary integrity to close that Venezuelan history chapter and prevent further elite hemorrhaging. Velásquez's main objective was restoring tranquility and confidence to the country following the tensions

experienced since that presidential term's beginning, a goal requiring him to lower political temperatures while allowing the population to be led to electoral elections on December 5. New coup attempt rumors accompanied the interim presidency, to the extent that skepticism surrounding presidential elections holding was evident. Rafael Caldera's triumph in the December elections meant a social recompositing hope reason. Already in his first government (1969–1974), he had been responsible for Venezuelan guerrilla pacification and guerrilla insertion into national life. History once again placed him in nation stabilization tasks, this time with military institution reconstruction as a priority. However, just like the expectations held with Pérez to reissue his first government's bonanza version, Caldera did not achieve the long-awaited social and institutional recompositing either.

Deterioration continued increasing because society, unable to find participation channels kidnapped by political parties that would allow expressing its position meaningfully, had to resign itself to an intermittent role in each national, regional, and local election. The cycle of elite contestation without genuine democratic participation continued despite formal elections. Despite COPRE's efforts to offer a modern country vision to aspire to, the political system resisted truly profound changes, barely allowing the direct mayors and governors election, the decentralization process beginning, and uninominal election. These reforms, which many viewed as defense mechanisms generated by the 1989 crisis rather than openings to genuine political participation spaces, proved inadequate to the task of reconstruction.

Analysis of the Representation Model and Its Crisis

In 1993, the trigger for the Venezuelan political system's crisis reached culmination, bipartisanship's breakdown and considerable abstention increase as a political manifestation, reaching approximately 40 % (Duhamel & Cepeda, 1997, p. 307). It was then that with bipartisanship's disappearance, materialized in Rafael Caldera's re-election in 1993, who, having been one of the State of Parties model's fundamental pillars, broke with COPEI to run for the presidential candidacy with another political party, CONVERGENCIA an organization composed of social-Christian dissidence with support from other left-wing parties such as the Movement for Socialism (MAS)obtained the first magistracy with 30 % of the votes (Duhamel & Cepeda, 1997, p. 307), marking partyocracy's end as a political model. The bipartisan system that had structured Venezuelan politics since 1958 had finally collapsed.

However, beyond this immediate political realignment, the Venezuelan political crisis reasons can be found in the established democratic order's basic conditions modification. Interpreting Rey's scheme as cited by Kornblith (1996, p. 2), the crisis reduces to the rentier model crisis, the representation and legitimacy model crisis, and the consensus generation mechanisms crisis and conflict channeling. These crises led to the deterioration of collective well-being expectations that had guaranteed abundant oil income. By not finding political organization support for demand channeling and expression, serious democratic model imbalances developed, which, as Latinobarómetro (2005, p. 48) indicates, continue to be considered the predominant system, placing it at 7.6 on a scale of 1 to 10 a notable decline from earlier assessments.

Among other reasons, the erratic manner in which the political class managed its loss of legitimacy by March 1990 the political parties had a rejection rate of 56 %, remaining above this figure throughout 1991 (Njaim et al., 1998, p. 17), paved the way for the definitive break with the political model that had prevailed until 1993. This explains the desperate measures of last-minute alliances for the 1998 elections, which did nothing but show the political leadership's weakness to confront an aggressive discourse blaming political parties for their responsibility in the country's crisis.

The 1998 electoral victory of Hugo Chávez (1998–2013) summarized the country's rejection of a model of doing politics that appeared to have distanced itself completely from collective needs. With an electoral participation of 6,988,291 voters, Chávez won with 3,971,239, placing abstention at 36.24 % (Molina & Álvarez, 2004, p. 43). However, the arrival of Chávez to the national presidency generated widespread fears and expectations across the entire political spectrum. For many it was a punishment for the regime's failures; for others it represented hope for change. The president's political project began by replacing the 1961 Constitution, leading through a series of consultation processes intended to guarantee the legitimacy of measures to be taken: the Consultative Referendum of 04-25-99, the Approval Referendum of 12-15-99, and the 2000 Presidential Elections, in which there was a slight increase in abstention, standing at 43.5 % (Molina & Álvarez, 2004, p. 44).

In these circumstances, the political parties, which had become the target of criticism of the revolutionary project, found themselves disarmed by their level of societal acceptance and legitimacy. The loss of legitimacy of political organizations resulted directly from their distance from collective interests, in which the revolutionary political process only acted as a catalyst for transformations already underway. Certain figures of the traditional political class attempted to return to the scene through the Democratic Coordinator, a multi-representative body of political interests in opposition to the Chávez government; however, the reluctance of the traditional leadership to renew itself definitively has led the political system to travel

the paths of deinstitutionalization (Molina & Álvarez, 2004).

Venezuelan democratic representation can be analyzed based on the three variables emphasized by Kornblith (1996), crisis of the socioeconomic model and social expectations; crisis of the representation and legitimacy model; and crisis of mechanisms for generating consensus and channeling conflicts. The model's expression, which had been based on a rentier economy sustained through social pacts, with strong executive power presence and clear party hegemony, was exhausted from the economic crisis unleashed by *Black Friday* in 1983, the social rupture represented by the Caracazo in 1989, the two coup attempts of 1992, Pérez's dismissal in 1993, and Caldera's electoral victory in 1993.

The absence of redefinition of the socioeconomic model allowed the nation to conceive of the State as a provider entity, without being able to consolidate a true culture of productive work. Consequently, the State assumed such diverse and complex responsibilities that even when its capacity to process or satisfy demands was compromised by insufficient resources, instead of stimulating economic diversification, it deepened its interventionism (despite the privatization processes undertaken) by regulating the economic process and implementing measures without considering complementary social policies. This contradiction proved fatal to regime legitimacy.

Hence, the aspiration to consolidate a pluralist democracy model was truncated, among other reasons, by the patronage culture stimulated by the partydocracy the government of the parties wherein representatives and governors, in a relationship of mediatization of represented groups, forced the submission of voters to the parties, giving more importance to the parliamentary fractions in the legislative power than to the initiatives inspired by the community. This degenerated into the political control of the party leaders, substituting the State of Parties (defined as the model wherein there is interaction between the legal-political system and the socio-political system) for genuine democratic responsiveness (Brewer, 1988, p. 9). In Venezuela, political participation was formally done through political parties, who omnipresently colonized (Levine, 2001, p. 11) the other organized civil sectors, guilds, unions, among others.

This was supported by institutionalized mechanisms such as electoral legislation that on the one hand limited external interests to those of the status quo and on the other granted sufficient concessions to strengthen (especially financially) the traditional parties. It was precisely the culture of pacts, which made it possible to engage various political actors, that managed to shape the social fabric of the country, which became perverted to such an extent that the result was that of an agreed democracy with limited representation of the interests of society and not of those represented, since every demand had to be channeled through the party to be considered legitimate. To give it course, it had to be inserted within the class interests defended by the parties. In this sense, Alain Touraine's observation is pertinent to define representativeness, "The democratic system is weak if the support given to a political party is what determines the positions taken in the face of the main social problems, while it is strong if the political parties provide answers to the social questions formulated by the actors themselves and not only by political parties and the political class"(2002, p. 325). Venezuelan democracy was, by this standard, profoundly weak.

Precisely, one of the factors affecting the loss of legitimacy of the parties has to do with the modification of the needs of society, which exceeded the response capacity of the political organizations, who were not accustomed to being interlocutors but rather mediators between state and society. The inability of traditional political parties to channel the conflict and control social organizations, which in the 1980s began to emerge as expressions outside the parties, reflected itself in the levels of representation in the legislative power. In 1993, the AD and COPEI parties, gathering 46 % of the parliamentary votes, later in 1998 stood at 36 %, which in the year 2000 was reduced to 21 % (Molina & Álvarez, 2004, p. 35). This reflects the failure of political parties as mediators of public policies and their inability to construct inter-party relations allowing them to structure mechanisms for negotiation and consensus.

The parties that related to the population in a patronage manner were disoriented on how to establish connection with the electoral population, reflecting the lack of partisan (ideological) identification and the depth of social rapport. Another aspect involves the high electoral volatility shown in recent years, where movement occurred from predominance of moderate center-right parties to overwhelming preference for radical left alternatives. In any case, it explains the traditional parties loss of legitimacy. However, the possibility of abandoning the political party in order to build a base of support wherein the leader-people relationship requires dispensing with the political organization remains worrying for democratic prospects. In this sense, personalism has been strengthened, even with the decentralization process, which was taking away space from the traditional parties in the figure of their political elite, to give more development possibilities to regional leaderships: Salas, Rosales, and Velásquez, among other examples.

When circles of the political parties, which had assumed the role of societal mediator, were excluded from decision-making processes and confronted the necessity to generate mechanisms for conflict resolution, institutional vacuum for consensus creation emerged. It was then that society began

questioning democracy itself, interpreting that the political system compromised the model, stimulating a kind of "flirtation"with authoritarian formulas, justified by the need to discipline power exercise. In democracy, the issue of representativeness necessarily translates into an issue of trust and credibility. The loss of these values influenced society to the point that the turnout for elections from 81.77 % in 1988 reached 56.6 % in 2000 (Electoral Democracy Index, 2004, p. 39), a precipitous decline indicating fundamental delegitimization.

Final Thoughts

The political institutionality in Venezuela during almost three decades has been a reflection of the perils of pursuing power as an end in itself, without concern for institutional stability or popular welfare. The perversion of maintaining an institutional order, increasingly removed from society and overwhelmed by the excesses of the elite in power, inevitably led to the substitution of one elite for another completely different in form but remarkably similar in destructive capacity. The political reality of Venezuela reveals marked deinstitutionalization, with a Legislative branch that bows to the Executive demands, a Judicial branch that receives orders from the Executive, an Electoral branch that responds to Executive needs, and a Citizen branch that, by its actions, appears more as the Executive's solicitor.

Venezuelan society has been witnessing one of the most important periods of its republican life, since all those institutions and the principles on which they were built have been eroded. The separation of powers of the liberal doctrine, from the year 2000 onward, became blurred through the control exercised by the National Executive over legislative, judicial, electoral, and comptroller actions. The political use given to parliamentary activity, the administration of justice, electoral processes, and the comptroller function has been alarming, without any decision being made to reverse this accelerated process of institutional loss. The greatest damage has been done to democracy itself as a way of life, as a political system, and as a form of government since political discourse downgraded democracy as a framework for the revolutionary political project, even though it was evidently absent from most of the political processes.

When delving into the origins of the Venezuelan political crisis, one finds that the problem of legitimacy presents itself as the axis of the existing institutional absence. The illegitimacy of the system is so serious that all the fundamental institutions of democracy have been blurred. It is important to recognize that the exhaustion of the consensual system built from the Puntofijo Pact deteriorated due to the effects of party democracy, wherein parties colonized civil society and mediated all social demands. The Venezuelan political system that was consolidated after successive authoritarian periods granted an enormous and unchecked power for the parties; all instances of the bureaucratic apparatus and fundamental institutions were penetrated by their influence, making political patronage the only form of participation available to ordinary Venezuelans.

Although democracy was constitutionally enshrined as representative, this model was never been fully developed in Venezuelan practice. Precisely, the crisis of legitimacy is a product, to a large extent, of the scant representativeness of the political leaders; this is fundamentally due to the lack of credibility in their leadership. The Venezuelan political class neglected its responsibility to lead and guide its voters and instead dedicated itself to strengthening its elite position, defending particular interests over collective welfare. The image of the political leader became so distorted that the Venezuelan electorate found the political leadership deficient and untrustworthy.

With these characteristics, the dominant power relations did not allow articulating the demands of the popular sectors, making their participation effective in the so-called consensual democracy only every five years in the exercise of the vote; the most frequent way of participation was through the link with one of the political parties of the status quo (political clientelism). As the government and institutions lost representativeness, illegitimacy increased and the democratic regime was devalued. Given these conditions, it proved difficult to articulate a political project that would respond to existing needs, since there was no political will to sacrifice particular interests in order to achieve objectives that would benefit the majority. Thus, a political model developed that ended up destroying the possibilities of a stable, legitimate democracy. For ordinary Venezuelans, the political system did not represent their interests; there were no possibilities to participate meaningfully in the decision-making process that affected them; there was no active leadership committed to public welfare it was a regime that did not represent the group's values, undermining credibility systematically.

Political crises, properly understood as institutional crises, are produced in the Venezuelan case by multiple causes, among which the loss of legitimacy of Venezuelan democratic institutions stands paramount. The military leadership's moral authority became compromised by its proximity to the political parties of the status quo, considering that military institutions fundamental principles are obedience and superiority of command. How could that high military investiture be maintained when moral principles were overlooked in exchange for personal benefits? The lower and intermediate officers were not unaware of this behavior; hence the two military

pronouncements of 1992. With this, the internal fracture of the National Armed Forces was demonstrated, becoming evident that military leadership had lost legitimacy because if it was incapable of exercising its authority, it allowed the deepening of the gap between high command and the rest of the Armed Forces.

Valuable references can be obtained from the military crisis for understanding the exhaustion of the Venezuelan political model. The 4F revealed the breakdown of the internal unity of the Armed Forces; the 27N reflected the discontent of some military sectors with the moral corruption that took hold of military leadership. In addition, there is a key fact strengthening the idea of the weight that legitimacy loss carries in political crisis: the values and principles that came out to defend and rescue the insurgents of 4F and 27N are not the same as those of the political class. Back then, in the popular classes, despite not having identified with the committed sectors, the similarity of ideas and needs was undeniable. The banners of the insurrectionary movements coincided with those of the popular sectors: the rescue of the country through moral reconstruction.

After almost thirty years of Chavismo, the possibilities of restructuring the Venezuelan institutional system seem uncertain, since institutional reengineering will not be possible while the country is at a crossroads with the aspiration of regime change through international pressure from the United States. The loss of institutional legitimacy cannot be overcome by changing the regime's face; a democratic transition will depend not only on the economic stability the Trump administration is seeking. The lesson of Venezuela's trajectory, from initial democratic promise through institutional decay to authoritarian consolidation, is that institutions without legitimacy and responsiveness cannot survive, particularly when facing economic crisis and political stress. The future requires not merely new leaders but fundamental institutional reform, genuine democratic participation, and moral recommitment to public welfare over private interest.

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