

The sunset for the traditional Political Parties in Venezuela*

El ocaso de los partidos políticos tradicionales en Venezuela

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Resumen

El artículo busca mostrar los cambios y el contexto del sistema político venezolano que llevó al crepúsculo de los partidos políticos tradicionales. Parte de una visión histórica identificando cómo en la evolución de estas instituciones políticas se crearon las condiciones para la erosión de los partidos como ejes de la vida política venezolana. Se analiza el deterioro de la fórmula AD-COPEI y se esboza la aparición de los movimientos personalistas, el fenómeno “chavista” como una de las consecuencias del declive de las formas organizadas de representación.

Palabras clave autor

Partidos políticos-Venezuela, acción democrática, Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente –COPEI–, democracia, elecciones.

Abstract

This article seeks to show the changes and the political context in which the Venezuelan traditional political parties were eroded. The article begins with an historical overview identifying how the development of these political institutions created the conditions for the erosion of the parties as axes of political life in Venezuela. Analyzes the deterioration of the formula AD-COPEI and outlines the emergence of personalistic movements, the phenomenon “Chavez” as a consequence of the decline of organized forms of representation

Key word author

Political parties, Venezuela, Acción Democrática, Democracy, Electoral Process, Democratic Action.

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The sunset for the traditional Political Parties in Venezuela

The political system in Venezuela had faced many changes in the recent decades. One of the most important variations has been the crisis of the traditional parties and the breakdown of the predominance of the two main parties *Acción Democrática* and COPEI. The Venezuelan democracy had been defined as a democracy of parties or *partidocracia*, in which the parties tried to preserve and consolidate the democracy displacing the military as the main actor in the political sphere and organizing many aspects of the Venezuelan social life. But since the last two decades the parties lost part of their traditional support and faced a crisis that transformed the political system, with the arose of new political and personalistic alternatives.

There are many elements that were present in the transformation of the Venezuelan party system. For many analysts the element that triggered the change was the deterioration of the socioeconomic condition in general and the difficulties to satisfy the demands of the Venezuelans¹ (Kornblith, 1996, pp. 6-7); for others the corruption scandals damaged the image and confidence of the people in the traditional politicians.² (Alvarez, 1996, p. 134) But these elements are “external”, in the first case, or “isolated cases” as in the second case, to the party system and can be found in other regional experiences without representing a major wound for the party system. In that direction the aim of this essay is to present some considerations in relation with the main political parties of Venezuela and explore why they were no apt to respond to the recent challenges of the Venezuelan democracy and lost their majority support in front of other new political organizations.

Between 1973 to 1988 the main political parties *Acción Democrática* (AD) and COPEI obtained an average of 70% of the National Congress while the third force never reached more than 11%; but this situation changed by 1993 when AD and COPEI obtained just 50% and other forces such as *La Causa Radical* (LCR) gained 20% and *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS) and *Convergencia* 10%. Until 1993 AD-COPEI were the only political parties with the capacity to obtain the presidency; in 1993 *Convergencia*, a dissidence of COPEI won the presidency with Caldera; and by 1998 the transformation was more profound with the electoral success of the platform *Movimiento Quinta República*, MVR, based on the charismatic leadership of Hugo Chávez.

¹ The oil rent gave the Venezuelan state the opportunity to distribute the fiscal revenue trough the public expenditure, which established a link between political democracy and socioeconomic development. This model generated high expectative among the citizens, situation that was not sustainable when the oil prices decreased and the government was unable to satisfy demands.

² The crisis of the political parties is then linked to the change in the attitudes of the voters and the change in the pattern of electoral behaviour. The citizens seemed more oriented to personal leaderships (regional and national level) and have better opinion towards non partisan organizations such as the Church, Military forces and media.

The article will be divided in two parts, in the first section I will characterize what had happened with the political parties in Venezuela since 1980 onwards, giving special attention to the changes in the perception of the voters and the deterioration of the image of the political parties. In the second part of the essay I will try to find some causes of the transformation of the party system within the main political parties. The main consideration here will be that the history of the parties (AD-COPEI) can explain why they were not flexible to respond to the changes presented in the previous section. The general idea is that the main political parties tried to preserve their position in the system by a highly disciplined, powerful and centralized party structure with the paradoxical effect that it made them slow and inadequate to face the changes in the electorate and the economic and political life.

What happened with the political parties? Changes in the perception of the voters the erosion of the party image

The electoral behaviour of the Venezuelan voters had changed. During the years of the predominance of the traditional parties the disappointment with the results of the administration were expressed through the *péndulo* rule, meaning that people would punish bad performance of the government voting for the party in opposition in the next presidential elections³ (Molina & Pérez, 1996, pp. 196-200). But soon this alternation of political parties was replaced with the expression of a more evident discomfort within the electorate.

In 1986 the president Jaime Lusinchi requested a study in order to identify the reforms needed by the country and one of the problems highlighted by the *Comisión Presidencial para la Reforma del Estado* (COPRE) was the “*partidocracia*” or excessive protagonism of the political parties in the life of the country. The suggestions included the revision of the internal party rules and regulations, candidate selection, renewal of party leaders, campaign finances and party operations. This internal awareness of the need of change in the structure of the parties was reinforced by the change in the electoral results and the increase in party disaffection.

The survey DOXA- CIEPA and Datanalysis had been researching the levels of confidence and legitimacy of the democratic institutions in Venezuela showing as result that in Venezuela the governments had been facing a progressive deterioration of the public support and these has been reflected in the perception of the political parties. By 1990 just 11% of the people surveyed considered that the government was performing well or relatively well, 87% of the persons considered that the political parties are just concerned with winning elections while in other survey in the same year 89% agreed

³ In 1968 COPEI won the presidency in 1973 AD, 1978 COPEI, 1983 and 1988 AD, 1993 Covergencia, Caldera's movement with dissident of COPEI.

that “*los partidos políticos están controlados por un grupito que solo se ocupa de sus propios intereses*”. (Coppedge, 1993, p. 141)

The loyalty of the voters towards the parties also diminished during the 80's and 90's allowing the increase of the self identification of the voter as independent. In 1973 48,7% of the population considered themselves militant or sympathizer of one of the political parties, decreasing 10% in ten years (38,4% by 1983) and by 1990 representing just 32,4%, and by 1992 was 28%, as found in Alvarez (1996, p. 142). The sector that consider themselves as not affiliated to any particular party increased from 19,2% to 38% from 1973 to 1983 and by 1990 was 47% (Molina & Pérez, 1996, p. 154). Since 1979 the surveys also showed that the political increased their negative image; in that year 70% considered that the parties were important for the political process by 1982, 36% had a negative image of the parties and for 1988 this number increased to 55%. Álvarez (1996, p. 135) found that in 1991 65% of the citizens surveyed considered that the political parties “*no sirven para nada en este país*”.

Venezuelan democracy had presented high levels of electoral participation (the vote was mandatory) in some years reaching more than 90%, but with the increase of party disaffection the levels of abstention grew. By 1988 in the national elections the abstention was 18,3% and five years later it increased to 39,8%. The decentralization process and the introduction of the direct election of local authorities was designed to close the gap between the citizens and the political system, but the abstention in these election showed the contrary. The first election for governors was held on 1989 with abstention of 54,96%, by 1992 a modest decrease to 50,4%, to increase again in 1995 to 53,8% (Kornblith, 1996, p. 17)

The crisis of the democracy and political parties

Between 1992 and 1993 the Venezuelan political system faced two major challenges with deep repercussion in the transformation of the party system. In 1992 two attempts of coup took place, one in the 4th of February and the other on the 27th of November, and in 1993 Carlos Andres Perez was the first president suspended for mismanagement of public resources. The democracy continued being the most desirable form of government for the Venezuelans but it lost support. In 1993 52% of the people in DATOS survey considered that a coup has justification, while 48% considered that under no conditions a coup could be justified.

Since then some analysts were aware of the risks of the deterioration of the political parties and representatives which opened spaces for charismatic leaders to arise. After the first coup 4 out of 10 participants in a survey considered that Venezuela required a democracy without the existent political parties while 8% of the people supported a military government (Myers, 1993, p. 62). The survey DATOS 1992 showed that the

people tended to favored a government with a civilian no attached to any of the existent political parties. “*El rechazo a un eventual presidente militar independiente es menor que las de rechazo a un civil adeco o copeyano*”.⁴ In an study of political attitudes made just months alter the first attempted coup in 1992 Njaim, Combelles an Alvarez found a direct relation between the more favourable opinion of public leaders and the levels of distance and criticism with government an political parties. The figures with positive image included ex president Caldera, Hugo Chavez and Arturo Ulsar Pietri.

The challenge for the Venezuelan democracy was then to find new ways to channel the representation, the problem was that nor the main traditional parties AD-COPEI neither the alternatives such as MAS and LCR had good levels of acceptance among the public opinion which was more attracted for new political expression. Hugo Chávez and Arias Cardenas ex military involved in the attempted coup of 4F-1992 started their political carrer. By 1995 Arias was elected governor of Zulia, while in 1998 after a few years of campaign for abstention Chavez resulted elected president.

The negative perception of the main traditional parties and the new phenomenon of the *Movimiento Quinta República*, MVR, favoured the apparition of new parties such as *Proyecto Venezuela* and *Primero Justicia* which opposed Chávez (Ramos, 2002, p. 196) and other movements that made occasional alliances with MVR such as *Patria Para Todos*, PPT, faction of *La Causa Radical*, LCR. At the same time the tension produced by the electoral phenomena of Chavez made more evident the frictions and ruptures of the traditional parties which just few days before the elections retired their support to their own candidates and backup the candidature of Salas Romer of *Proyecto Venezuela*.

These political organizations had been highlighting their differences with the traditional parties and in some cases used the word political movement instead party. In the case of MVR this organization has presented not a clear intention of creating a party structure, being more an electoral platform supported by the charismatic leadership of Chávez (López Maya, 2002, pp. 181-182). During his administration the rules for the political parties had changed, the prohibition of the use of public funds, currently within the National Assembly the representatives must be presented following a regional criteria not a fraction, and for some the political parties “*han desaparecido, en tanto instituciones reconcidas constitucionalmente como articuladoras de las demandas de la sociedad civil.*” (Manrique, 2001, p. 179) The recent presidential elections in December 2006 made evident the high level of fragmentation of the party system in Venezuela. The reelected president Chávez concurred with his MVR platform but also with a coalition of

⁴ 46% of the people surveyed expressed that they were against a government of AD, while 35% rejected a COPEI government, but just 24% found not desirable a military in power.

24 other political parties, while the second most important candidate Manuel Rosales with the movement *Un Mundo Nuevo* had the support of other 42 political organizations.

Why it happened? The imperative of strong parties as safeguard for the democracy and the problems of representation

The main Venezuelan political parties, before the crisis, were originated during the 1930's and 1940's in opposition to the military regimes (Hillman, 1994, p. 61).⁵ The early forms of organization of these parties can be traced to the student's movements of late 1920's that attempted a coup against Gomez, reason why some of their leaders went to exile and started the articulation of political organizations that resulted in the creation of *Acción Democrática* in 1941 by Romulo Gallegos and COPEI in 1946 by Rafael Caldera. The Communist party was created in 1931 and for some years worked as the *Partido Republicano Progresista*. During the 1930's the cells of the current parties channelled all their activities to opposing the government.

The overthrow of Gr. Isaiás Medina was lead by AD in 1945 consolidating their position as the main party in Venezuela during the *Trienio* 1945-1948. In the elections for representatives to the Constitutional Assemble, Congress and presidency the party obtained an average of 70% of the votes. AD started to create a truly national party organization with mass based orientations, creating new social organizations subordinated to the party, AD guide the process of reorganization of the unions and social organizations. This process created friction with the other parties that became more antagonists. In November 1948 President Rómulo Gallegos was overthrown in a military coup, after which AD and the Communist party were declared illegal. COPEI and the *Unión Republicana Democrática* continued their activities but highly restricted by the government.

In 1952 during the elections for representatives for the *Asamblea Nacional Constituyente* the *Junta Militar* dissolved the URD and sent to exile their leader Jóvito Villaba despite the electoral results that gave them the victory. Pérez Jiménez assumed power and reduce the activities of most of the parties to the clandestinely. One of the effects of the persecution and secrecy was that the parties found a common task: the reestablishment of the democracy. For Molina and Pérez (1996, pp. 202-2005) this objective allowed the creation of links and cooperation between their leaders and followers, reducing the ideological and political confrontation.

The Venezuelan political parties after the restoration of the democracy in 1958 opted for an approach of pacts and negotiations with the social groups and especially between them with the aim of strengthen the democracy. The Pact of *Punto Fijo* tried to guarantee

⁵ In that sense "rather than products of nineteenth century inraelite cleavages, were (the parties) the expression of rapidly modernizing society".

the participation of the three main political parties in the government and through the *Declaración de principios y programa mínimo* the observance of some political and economical interests. Other minority parties were excluded from the agreement and the traditional Communist party was also excluded from the system reinforcing the creation of guerrillas. By 1960 URD left the Punto Fijo system, leaving just AD and COPEI as the main parties in the control of the state.

The process of configuration of the parties also created a centralized structure vertically organized, in which the party controlled the access to the political arena. These limitations set a precedent for the discipline of the parties that continued over the time. The nomination depended on the lobbying of leaders at national level rather than party militants or regional elites, and the desire to be reelected created incentives for the members to follow the party line (Kulisheck & Caniche, 1998, pp. 41-43)

During many years the pact design of the political parties served as protection to the system, guaranteed the governability of the country. For some analysts, the Venezuelan system favoured governability in detriment to the representation, because the pacts made the difference between the political programs of the two main parties more blurred at the time that despite having a proportional representation electoral system the number of effective parties was reduced and in some cases created a kind of bipartisan system. (Mc Coy, 1993, pp. 17-20).

Historically the political parties played a mediating role between the state and the society through the organization of the labour, to avoid or reduce the partisan conflict within these organizations the leaders of the parties decided to create a unified movement based on proportional representation (Mc Coy, 1989, p. 43).⁶ At the same time the strong organization of the social life was directed to generate nets of political and social support for the democratic regime.

In Venezuela the political parties replaced the military forces as the organization predominant in the political system, “*el único vehículo nacional de la acción política ha sido por mucho tiempo el partido*” (Álvarez, 1996, pp. 131-133). The idea behind this behaviour of the parties was to avoid open conflict, division and possibilities of disorder, because it had been in the past, excuses used by the military intervention. But at the same time “*esa penetración cabal de otras organizaciones tiene el efecto especialmente pernicioso de cerrar casi todos los canales posibles para el reclamo político, a excepción de los partidos*” (Coopededege, 1993, p. 155). In a similar direction Perdomo Pérez blame the extension of the activities of the political parties in Venezuela, beyond the traditional functions of discussion of ideological issues and electoral association,

⁶ The organization was the *Confederación de Trabajadores Venezolanos*, CTV. The idea of a single labour organization also was designed to discourage parallel unions in the same industry.

as one of the causes for the corruption and trough that to the delegitimization of the political system (Perdomo, 1995, p. 329).

The predominante role of AD and COPEI in the political system represented by no means the inexistence of other political alternatives. On the contrary, after the restoration of the democracy in 1958 new political parties were created. Some of them as divisions of the main parties, some as regional and ideological expressions. The Communist Party suffered divisions in 1968 with the *Union para Avanzar* and in 1971 with the *Movimiento al Socialismo*. AD suffered one of its most important divisions with the creation of *Movimiento Electoral del Pueblo* in 1968, but was also weakened by the departure of the MIR faction in 1961 and ARS in 1963; and also some leftist parties as the Causa R that emerged as a regional party (Hellinger, 1995, pp. 125-128)⁷ But AD and COPEI remained during the first forth decades of democracy as the main political organisations of Venezuela.

When the crisis of the political system was evident there were some initiatives within the parties to restore the “political order”. The first proposal was the initiation of a process for a Constitutional reform that started in 1989 with Caldera initiative and ended in 1992 in the Congress when AD decided not to support the initiative. Despite this event AD and COPEI agreed to negotiate a national pact or “*política de entendimiento nacional*” which aim was to commit the leaders with the legislative agenda of fiscal reform, social security, reform to the financial sector and public credit; these ideas were present again in the “*Gran Acuerdo Nacional*” but the agreement never acquired formal expression. The political parties lost the ability for the pacts, the minor parties considered that some of these subjects were neoliberal, for others it would represent limitations to their actions or just made evident the difficulties to cooperate (Navarro, 1993, pp. 80-84).

During the second administration of Carlos Andres Pérez he tried to change his relation with the party, acting more independent and including into the government no party members, “he often treated the Comité Ejecutivo Nacional as a forum in which he merely informed the party of his thinking” (Martz, 1995, p. 50). In 1992 and 1993 during the political crisis AD tried to straighten the distance between the party and the performance of Carlos Andres Pérez and excluded him from the party, but he had been a long term secretary general and twice president for that organization, so it was difficult to separate his image with the party; the issue of corruption scandals and the prosecution

⁷ In contrast with the high level of organization of the traditional parties, the Causa R has been characterised as a flexible party in which the election of the leaders is not well established and relayed in the natural leadership of the members in the assembles. This flexible can be also an element of weakness because the representatives are not subject to party discipline and is not clear whether and how leadership can be renewed at the top, in addition to the pressure to articulate domestic and foreign policy.

process made more evident the differences between the parties (Rey, 1998, p. 20) The COPEI faced in the elections the independent candidature of his more prominent leader and founder Rafael Caldera declaring a substantial rupture of the party organization. (Caballero, 2003, p. 201)

Internal system of the parties: cure and illness

One of the most relevant theorists of political parties, Robert Dahl, highlighted some characteristics of a healthy party system in which he included the freedom for the organization of the individuals in movements, groups and unions, a wide opportunity to elect and be elected, the right of the leaders to compete for the support of the voters and an institutional framework that assure that the governmental policies are dependent on the votes and the expressions of preference of the citizens. Once these variables were used to understand the Venezuela political system, Coopedge found that the activities of the main parties were restricting the fulfillment of these characteristics.

The organization of the parties AD and COPEI had produced a structure highly centralized designed to strengthen their position in the system but also it was the cause of the increasing distance with the electorate and reinforcing some frictions within the party structure. The paradox in Venezuelan politics is that the parties favoured this institutional structure as a way to protect the democracy in general, but specifically to retain their power, and ended with structures that with the time eroded the public support excluding the population and organized groups from choices outside the parties (Levine, 1998, pp. 195-196)

Both parties structures were similar, looking for the construction of truly national parties and the continue reinforcement of party discipline. Most of the decisions were held on the National Executive Committee, structure that had the right to select all the candidates that were running for the party for the Senate, House of Representatives and local councils. The party designed the list and the order of the candidates within it, the lists were closed and the names of the candidates did not appear in the electoral ballot, reason why the nominations were a central activity of the party disputes. This system produced the permanence of small groups of key players that used the party structure to distribute patronage to the supporters and which tried to stay within the party leadership for long periods of time reducing the chances of turnover in the party cupola.

The citizen had to elect between parties not candidates, reinforcing the role of the central party authorities among the candidates. "The elected candidate feels more obligated to the party for appointing him than to the electorate for having chosen him." (Gil Yepes, 1981, p. 60). Before the reform of 1988 the local mayors and governors were designed by the president, which also served to strengthen the power of the central authorities of the party. The parties tried to be consistent and disciplined in the legislature, creating

mechanisms to reinforce the control of the party among the congressman-woman, one of the most effectives was the decision that only members of the National Executive Committee of the party can preside congress committee. This process was considered to reduce the scope of the decision making process to the agreements in the party cupola. The party discipline also was expressed trough the decision system in the Congress; the votes were not counted individually but for the number of the members of the party delegations (Coopedge, 1993, p. 147).

But this highly centralism and discipline no made the parties immune to the internal tensions, on the contrary in some cases that characters were important part of these divisions. AD suffered some important splits that weakened their structure; some of these divisions had been related to the difficulty to agree the presidential candidatures with the different factions and generations within the party (Martz, 1966, pp. 100-101). In 1960 the most reformist sector left the party and created the *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria* (MIR), in 1962 was formed the *Movimiento AD-oposición* which was transformed to the *Partido Revolucionario Nacionalista* in 1964. Just three years later another division of the party gave birth to the *Movimiento Electoral del Pueblo* MEP. This later division was considered to have played an important role in the lost of the presidency in 1968 against COPEI.

During the first years of democracy COPEI is strengthened by their participation in the government and in the distribution of resources and patronalism with oil resources. During Leoni administration the party assumed a more active role as opposition consolidating their position as the “alternative” party. This party avoided the internal feuding and factionalism especially trough the prestige of is founder Caldera; but by 1988 with the nomination of Fernandez as presidential candidate created internal divisions; that ended in his retirement of his own party.

Since 1989 there has been a series of reforms to the electoral system with the aim of make the parties more responsible to the electoral demands and more “open” and democratic in their procedures. These ideas included the preferential and the uninominal vote for the composition of the collegiate bodies. The parties tried to adapt themselves to these changes with systems of consultation for the election of the internal authorities and candidates, but in many cases resulted not very successful.

The idea behind the electoral transformations and the decentralization (administrative and political) was to develop local leaders with their own power less indebted to the party national leaders. Also the “debate between the orthodox sectors and those demanding renovation, between the older and younger generations, has permitted the establishment of an open forum regarding future leadership and new guidelines.” (Gueron, 1993, p. 9)

But some of the characteristics that analysts highlight of the transformation of the political parties are that despite the introduction of new generations in the party cupola here has not been accompanied by a comparable number of retirements, and the main parties in Venezuela presented a low level of political turnover. Despite the introductions of changes to correct the role of the parties the economic crisis and the lessening of the capacity of distribution of resources and benefits damaged the capacity of the parties to face the changes in the electorate.

One of the most important concerns for the political parties was the sustainability of the democracy as a system, reason why “party elites concentrated on maintaining a stability protective of the status quo, and the earlier emphasis on participation and attention to the grass roots gradually diminished. Ideological and doctrinal preoccupations also declined.” (Martz, 199, p. 34). The application of this rules of negotiation, distribution and stability seeking had in the long term a negative effect in the parties, because they “ceased to be drive belts between the citizens and the public institutions. The representative entities maintained few links with the electors. The electoral system excessively favoured the political parties, to the detriment of the individual.” (Torres Briceño, 1993, p. 126). But this greater distance of the parties with the electorate was also reflected in the emergence of civil society with organized expression outside the party controlled networks (Levine, 1995, p. 227).

Conclusion

The traditional parties’ structures proved inadequate to face the changes produced by their own behaviour. Their design and patterns of interaction with other parties and the citizen responded to the needs of a specific historical context in which the protection of the democracy required strong parties capable of reduce levels of political confrontation, in some cases trough the reduction of the ideological differences, in other cases by the centralized control of the political life. Both parties counted with strong historical leaderships that brought stability but at the same time reinforced the idea of low turnover in the political elites. The Venezuelan electorate started showing disaffection and distance with the parties in the 80’s, coinciding with the deterioration of the economical conditions, and reinforced by the corruption scandals.

The attempted coups in 1992 gave opportunity to reflect in other alternatives for the solution of the Venezuelan problems and more than disaffection with the democracy as model of government, it opened the space for alternatives leaderships including the one of Chavez. Some of the changes faced by the political system in Venezuela was the transition from the two party competition towards a more fragmented multiparty system with the electoral success of regional parties and then towards the predominance of the Chavez movement. *“Si hasta 1988, en la ecuación del triunfo electoral, la lealtad*

tradicional al partido aportaba la parte sustancial y el candidato la minoritaria, hoy es al revés. Los partidos son casi exclusivamente aparatos organizativos para facilitar la tarea de sus abanderados." (Molina Vega & Pérez Baralt, 2002, p. 151). The elements that were the strength of the traditional political parties in Venezuela ended being their weakness; the slow response of the parties to the changes in the electoral behavior was in part caused by the strong party machinery created after the restoration of the democracy.

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