

Universidade de São Paulo
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**A Evolução de um Regime Híbrido na
Venezuela Chavista: Entre Democracia e
Autoritarismo**

**(The Evolution of a Hybrid Regime in *Chavista* Venezuela:
Between Democracy and Authoritarianism)**

São Paulo

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Marsílea Gombata

**The Evolution of a Hybrid Regime
in *Chavista* Venezuela:
Between Democracy and Authoritarianism**

Ph.D. dissertation presented for the Graduate
Program in Political Science of The University
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obtaining the title of Ph.D in political science

Supervisor: Rafael Duarte Villa

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Epigraph

“Every revolutionary ends by becoming either an
oppressor or a heretic.”

Albert Camus



Campaign closure on Bolívar Avenue, Caracas, October 4th, 2012 (Gob.ve)

Dedication

To Sofia, the true love.

To Gabriel Pillar. Thank you for taking me to see the world. I remember that January afternoon in 2003, among clashes with police, watching Hugo Chávez's speech. It would be interesting to know how you would have seen *chavismo* in the end.

To my great-grandmother, Dolores Leiva Ruz. Your willpower – to learn to read and write at 50 years old – is an inspiration for all of us.

Notes

This dissertation is the result of more than 13 years observing *chavismo*. More than just a controversial character, Chávez, was a leader with an impressive trajectory. For those who love politics, it's almost impossible not to be interested in that.

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Abstract

This dissertation aims to provide a better understanding of the political system in Venezuela during the *chavismo* years. By analyzing the erosion of the Chavista democratic project over the years, the main idea is to figure out whether *chavismo* was democratic and became an authoritarian regime, or whether it had always been a hybrid one – with features from democracy and authoritarianism from the beginning. To adjudicate between these two premises, I have analyzed the transformation processes of the Venezuelan political system in the last 21 years. The main findings are that the process of erosion of Venezuelan democracy since 1999 has occurred in part due to clashes between government and opposition – as with the 2002 coup and the 2007 Constituent Assembly referendum, for instance – in which democratic aspects of the regime were weakened and authoritarian features became more prominent over the years. Because of this, I conclude that *chavismo* has always been a hybrid regime. However, in contrast to a transformation process from democracy to authoritarianism, in Venezuela I have seen a process in which authoritarian features have been strengthened and democratic ones have been diminished. I also argue that with Chávez, the Venezuelan political system was a hybrid one with a democratic leaning. With Maduro, it has changed, and Venezuela now has a hybrid political system on the authoritarian side. The future of the regime, however, is uncertain.

Key words: *chavismo*, democracy, authoritarianism, hybrid regime, Chávez, Maduro, Venezuela.

Resumo

Esta dissertação busca oferecer uma melhor compreensão do sistema político na Venezuela durante os anos do chavismo. Ao analisar a erosão do projeto democrático chavista ao longo dos anos, a ideia central é saber se o chavismo foi democrático e se tornou um regime autoritário, ou se sempre foi um regime híbrido – com traços de democracia e autoritarismo desde o início. Para avaliar essas duas premissas, analisei os processos de transformação do sistema político venezuelano nos últimos 21 anos. As principais conclusões são que o processo de erosão da democracia venezuelana desde 1999 ocorreu em parte devido a confrontos entre governo e oposição – como o golpe de 2002 e o referendo da Assembleia Constituinte de 2007, por exemplo – em que aspectos democráticos do regime foram enfraquecidos e características autoritárias tornaram-se mais proeminentes com o passar dos anos. Assim, concluo que o chavismo sempre foi um regime híbrido. No entanto, em contraste com um processo de transformação da democracia para o autoritarismo, na Venezuela houve um processo em que as características autoritárias foram fortalecidas e as democráticas foram diminuídas. Também argumento que, com Chávez, o sistema político venezuelano era híbrido no campo da democracia. Com Maduro, mudou, e a Venezuela agora tem um sistema político híbrido do lado autoritário. O futuro do regime, porém, é incerto.

Palavras-chave: chavismo, democracia, autoritarismo, regime híbrido, Chávez, Maduro, Venezuela.

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Appendix – Interviews of fieldwork:

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Douglas Bravo, guerrilla and founder of Venezuelan Revolutionary Party (PRV) - June 21st, 2019, in Caracas.

Edgardo Lander, emeritus at UCV – June 20th, 2019, in Caracas.

Eustóquio Contreras, *Chavista* congressman and former member of 1999 Constituent Assembly – June 18th, 2019, in Caracas.

Gabriela Ramírez, former national *ombudsperson* – May 26th, 2019, by Skype.

Germán Ferrer, former *Chavista* congressman – May 25th, 2019, by Skype.

Héctor Navarro, minister during Chávez government – June 19th, 2019, in Caracas.

Luis Lander, political scientist at UCV – June 21st, 2019, in Caracas.

Victor Álvarez, minister during Chávez's first term – June 19th, 2019, in Caracas.

Prologue

The idea for this research began with my detention by the Bolivarian National Guard (GNB) and the Bolivarian Intelligence Service (Sebin) in 2017. In May of that year I was detained while I was trying to get into the country to work as a journalist for Valor Econômico newspaper for a few days.

Venezuelan officials gave several arguments to justify the detention – for example, that I didn't have the special authorization from the Ministry of Popular Power for Communication and Information (Minci), which had been requested but never granted. The truth was that I was one of several journalists who had been denied access to enter the country during those weeks of intense protests against the government.

Somehow, my detention in May of that year highlighted a period of political crisis in Venezuela and contrasted with my initial perception of *chavismo*. In January 2003, Hugo Chávez was cheered at the World Social Forum III, held in Porto Alegre, almost a year after he survived a failed coup d'état by local businessmen, which had been supported by the United States government¹. His mandate

¹ At that time, the United States government, for instance, refused to use the word 'coup'. Furthermore, officials at the Organisation of American States and other diplomatic sources said the US administration was aware the coup and had consented to it.

See:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2002/04/13/leader-of-venezuela-is-forced-to-resign/cc06e4b8-5753-49b9-b3ec-864350cb762c/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/apr/21/usa.venezuela>

preceded a wave of leftist leaders in the region, along with Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil, Néstor Kirchner in Argentina, Evo Morales in Bolívia, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador, among others².

In the 24 hours that I was detained, I wondered how the country had come to that point, how a government that called itself progressive had been transformed into a State that was struggling to hide what was happening in the country. My intuition was that I was facing an authoritarian State, with censorship as its main weapon. But I didn't have the necessary evidence to explain how the *Chavista* regime had gotten there.

The experience, frustrating from the point of view of a journalist, was important as a researcher: it launched me in search of explanations for the authoritarian transformation that seemed to be underway.

One point, however, intrigued me. Was *chavismo* an authoritarian regime from the start, and I just hadn't realized it? Or was it a democratic project that was then transformed into an authoritarian political system?

On that day, I remembered a conversation with a Brazilian diplomat the previous year, in Caracas. He said that one of the characteristics of *Chavista* Venezuela was the dispute over narratives, marked by two distinct views on the same

² Hugo Chávez came to power in 1999, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Brazil) in 2002, Néstor Kirchner (Argentina) in 2003, Evo Morales (Bolívia) and Rafael Correa (Ecuador) in 2006. Other left-wing politicians came to power around the same time, such as Tabaré Vázquez (Uruguay) in 2005.

phenomenon. While the *Chavistas* saw the regime as an advance of the ongoing revolution, the opposition saw it as increasing authoritarianism. This dual perception reflects the mixed features of *Chavismo* – the hybridity that I would analyze years later in this work.

Introduction

Venezuela is one of most polarized countries in Latin America, perhaps in the world. The political and economic crisis which the country is going through nowadays highlights the confrontation between government and opposition that has been happening since the beginning and exposes a particular characteristic of *chavismo*. From the beginning, *chavismo* was marked by a dispute over narratives. Supporters of the project, since Hugo Chávez came to power in 1999, speak of the implementation of the so-called Bolivarian Revolution that aims to increase popular participation. It includes the lower classes in the political debate and benefits them by the distribution of oil income. Opponents, on the other hand, argue that the political and economic changes that have been implemented since the late 1990s have undermined democracy, caused the decline of institutions and put into practice the dynamics of authoritarianism.

This work seeks to contribute to the broad reflection on *chavismo* from a dual perspective. I argue here that, to understand the phenomenon, it is necessary to look at it through two lenses: the lens of what could be considered a democratic revolution and the lens of an authoritarian regime. In a simplified metaphor, imagine a person who needs to have glasses in order to see well, with one lens for hyperopia and one for astigmatism – if you focus on just one problem, you will not see the totality.

In the beginning, it could be said that *chavismo* was an intense experiment in popular participation. Tools of direct decision making – like referenda, *mesas*

técnicas de água and communal councils³ – show how the regime sought to meet the demands of a society that reflected the crisis at the end of the Punto Fijo political system, whose main characteristic was the alternation of power between the parties *Acción Democrática* (AD) and *Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente*, also known as *Partido Socialista Cristiano* or Copei.

In its second phase, *chavismo* went through a process of bureaucratization of this popular participation, which became dependent on the State and oil revenues. Some authors like Lander (2019)⁴ classify this second period as a Stalinist *chavismo*⁵, since the authoritarian bias became more evident and the means of opponents to contest were reduced. This process was triggered by internal and external variables, whose interaction resulted in clashes between government and opposition and a huge concentration of power in Executive hands. Here, the oil revenue peak was critical to strengthening Chávez, both in the Executive and

³ The *mesas* were community associations responsible for monitoring the water supply and sanitation networks in their neighbourhoods. They began in 1993 in Caracas and were expanded to the federal level in 1999. Communal councils, in turn, originated from neighbourhood associations that were formed in the 1980s and were in charge of decisions on local issues such as waste management.

⁴ LANDER, Edgardo, emeritus at Central University of Venezuela (UCV), in an interview with the author, on 20th June 2019, in Caracas.

⁵ According to BOBBIO, MATTEUCCI and PASQUINO (1983), authoritarian regimes are those that privilege governmental authority and diminish the importance of consensus, concentrating political power in the hands of a single person or political organism. In this context, the opposition is reduced to minimum expression, and the institutions that are designed to represent the authority from bottom up, end up being emptied. See more: BOBBIO, Norberto; MATTEUCCI, Nicola (1983). **Diccionario de política**. Brasília: Editora Universidade de Brasília.

among Venezuelans.

The third period of *chavismo* begins after Hugo Chávez's death in 2013, and is marked by the absence of the democratic elements that had characterized its initial phase. The increasing international pressure on Nicolás Maduro's government and the collapse of oil revenues are also important variables in this period. Again, the oil price variation on the international market was key to the recrudescence of the regime. In the second phase, the increase in oil revenues made Chávez more powerful, which led to a growth of authoritarian features. In the last years, although there was the opposite phenomenon of an oil price collapse, the outcome was roughly the same – the strengthening of the president, by subjugating the other powers and civil organizations to the Executive. The price variation indicates how this particular commodity plays a key role in Venezuelan politics.

In this third period, the intense polarization and deep economic catastrophe have plunged the country into the worst crisis in its recent history. Beyond the economic disaster of recent years, marked by famine and shortages of basic products such as sugar and rice, government and opposition clashes in different arenas have made it difficult for the crisis to recede. The dispute about narratives is not only more present than ever, but also serves to discredit the opponent and increase the level of tension between the two sides.

But how did *chavismo* get to this point? Did the dynamics of an inflamed confrontation between government and opposition exist from the start? It is

quite common to claim that *chavismo* has always been authoritarian (see Brewer-Carías, 2001⁶; Ramos Jiménez, 2006⁷ etc). The Venezuelan regime has many authoritarian characteristics and lacks the minimum attributes of democracy (such as alternation in power and an even playing field for the opposition). Yet, in its early years, *chavismo* seemed to represent a more democratic option than the status quo during the Punto Fijo years. Instead of the partyarchy⁸ of the previous decades, broader political participation was fostered through mechanisms of direct democracy such as citizen assemblies⁹. With all this in mind, the big question here is: did *chavismo* change from a defective democracy to a partially authoritarian regime, or was hybridity – democratic and authoritarian characteristics – inherent in the regime from the moment Chávez came to power?

To answer this question, I immersed myself in a four-year research project, in which I analyzed the different stages of *chavismo*, and tried to discover what lay

⁶ BREWER-CARÍAS, Allan R., (2001). **Golpe de Estado y Proceso Constituyente en Venezuela**. Ciudad de México: Universidad Autónoma de México.

⁷ RAMOS JIMÉNEZ, Alfredo. (2006). **De la Democracia Electoral a la Democracia Plebiscitaria. Elecciones y Referendos en la Venezuela de Chávez**. Mérida: Revista Venezolana de Ciencia Política. No 29, p. 7-37.

⁸ By partyarchy I mean to say an electoral democracy in which the key features of a competitive democracy (listed in the following pages) are distorted and manipulated by political parties to perpetuate themselves in office. See: COPEEDGE, Michael (1994). **Strong Parties and Lame Ducks: Presidential Partyarchy and Factionalism in Venezuela**. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994.

⁹ The citizen assemblies, whose decisions have a binding characteristic, preceded the communal councils.

behind the apparent authoritarian turn that it took. The idea was to map out the variables that were behind the transformation process, in order to determine whether there was a regime change from an initially democratic project to a political system with an authoritarian bias, or the dual aspect was a key feature of *chavismo* from the beginning.

To understand the context from which Chávez emerged in the 1990s, a brief part of this dissertation will map and analyze the years before Chávez came to power, to provide some insight into the nature of the relationship between government and opposition. A period after Chavez's death will also be analyzed. Nicolás Maduro's government, in power since Chávez's death, will be addressed in the final part. The aim is to analyze his years in office, to figure out what led to the deepening of authoritarian rule in Venezuela. The timeline will cover the final years of Punto Fijo to the the most recent years of Maduro's government. It is important to note, however, that the analysis of these late years of *chavismo* might be incomplete – developments are happening at a fast pace and some key episodes may be missed or not registered between the time I deliver this Ph.D. dissertation and the time you read it.

The dissertation will be divided into seven parts. In the current one, the **Introduction**, I explain the methodology of this work. This is an empirical research, based on a theoretical framework and interviews with actors involved in the process, which were done during my fieldwork research, in June 2019. The main argument for this work, however, was developed during the month I spent as a visiting student at The University of British Columbia (UBC), in Vancouver.

In this section I also present the main concepts of democracy, authoritarianism and hybrid regimes that will guide us to a better understanding of the transformation process of the Venezuelan political system.

The next section, **Chapter 1**, brings a theoretical debate on democracy and authoritarianism, as well as what features are necessary to define a regime inside one field or another. I also try to define what a hybrid regime is, and to distinguish a defective democracy or an incomplete authoritarian regime from a hybrid political system. The main hypothesis that I want to test is whether Chávez came to power when Venezuela had a defective democracy and, partly because of clashes with the opposition, the political system started to lose essential democratic features and acquired authoritarian characteristics. In this same section I say why we need to see it through two lenses – the democratic and the authoritarian – to understand *chavismo* in its totality. The main reason behind this can be explained by the hybridity that *chavismo* carried since its beginning. If you try to understand the phenomenon with only one lens or the other, the analysis will be incomplete.

Then, in **Chapter 2**, I try to explain how the populist conciliation system, known as Punto Fijo¹⁰, used to work and how it provided the necessary conditions for Chávez's emergence. He ascended to power after years of political crisis and social unrest. In the 80s and 90s, Venezuelans were exhausted with the

¹⁰ Between 1958 and 1998, only two parties, Acción Democrática (AD) and Copei, alternated in power.

partyarchy¹¹ of Punto Fijo and were demanding more representation. The economic crisis that took place in the final years of the *puntofijista* regime was also fertile ground for the ascension of a military figure like Chávez, who tried to overthrow the then president Carlos Andrés Pérez with a failed coup d'état in 1992.

Chávez distanced himself from his rivals in the election campaign by proposing a new Constitution in order to give more representation and deepen direct democratic tools. At that time, the Venezuelan political system and its democracy had a problem of legitimacy among the population and his proposals seemed to address this problem directly.

By the time Chávez arrived in office, he started to implement the changes that would be seen as a break with the PF years, as I show in **Chapter 3**. The proposal of a new Constitution through a referendum, and a Constituent Assembly, generated the first clash with the opposition. The level of tension would rise in a matter of weeks, with the push for the *Leyes Habilitantes*, a package of enabling laws that diminished the role of private companies in the oil sector and legalized the expropriation of lands considered unproductive. The package was key for the opposition to try to oust Chávez by coup d'état. General strikes, especially in the oil sector, tried to add pressure on Chávez's government. The coup only ousted him for some hours, but would set the tone of the relationship between

¹¹ COPEDGE, Michael (1994). Above-cited.

government and opposition, represented mostly by the business sector – the elite that was allied with the mainstream political parties of the *Punto Fijo* years.

After the coup, Chávez survived a recall referendum in 2004, but made it clear that opponents would not be forgiven during his presidency. The names of those who signed up for the recall referendum were leaked and they were fired from public office. Those who took part in the oil strikes were punished, with thousands of layoffs in the State oil company, *Petróleos de Venezuela*, known as PDVSA.

The following year, the opposition seemed to give up democratic rules and decided not to take part in the legislative election. *Chavismo* started to govern without checks and balances and with his re-election in 2006, it became more powerful. In these first years of *chavismo*, clashes between opposition and government undermined key features of a democratic system, such as the prominence of civilian over military, as well as using elections as a way to contest the incumbent's legitimacy. Both government and opposition seemed to choose alternative ways out of the democratic game to achieve their goals and concentrate more power.

With no checks and balances, and empowered by his re-election, Chávez proposed another constitutional referendum to modify more than thirty articles of the 1999 Charter. The main idea behind this was to strengthen Executive power, end the limits for re-election and foster a 21st-century socialism project, as presented in **Chapter 4**. He was defeated in the polls, but tried to implement

most of the changes by decree in subsequent years. In 2009, for instance, he emerged victorious from the referendum to end the limits for re-election of eligible officials.

As I said before, a key element to the concentration of power in Chávez's hands was the oil price explosion. With prices exceeding US\$ 100 per barrel, Chávez had enough export revenues to give up on negotiations and concessions to the business and productive sector, who were aligned with the opposition. Former members of his cabinet saw the rise of oil prices as a necessary – although not sufficient – condition for the recrudescence of the regime. The higher the oil prices, the greater the concentration of power in Executive hands, and the more limited the playing field for the opposition to contest the government. His election in 2012 for a third term reflected this context.

In **Chapter 5**, I analyze the first years of the government of Nicolás Maduro, Chávez's successor. Maduro's government was impacted by the oil price collapse after 2015, and a huge economic crisis that would set the tone of his authoritarian government as well as an even more combative relationship with the opposition. The loosening of democratic characteristics and acquisition of authoritarian ones became the new normal in his administration.

In the 2015 legislative elections, the government manoeuvred to prevent the opposition from having a qualified majority in Congress. The move was unprecedented and indicated an escalation in the authoritarian path the regime has followed since then. The government has been blocking all legal channels of

contestation and started to persecute opponents to prevent them from challenging *chavismo* by legal means.

Weakened by the oil price collapse and a lack of domestic legitimacy, Maduro avoided the recall referendum that should have been held in 2016, according to the Venezuelan Constitution, and called for a new referendum to change the Constitution in 2017. However, in contrast with the 1999 process, Maduro did not ask voters to change the Constitution. Instead, he just called for an election of the members of the new Constituent Assembly, which has acted as a Legislative superpower since then, overriding the other powers like the Congress and the Supreme Court.

His re-election in 2018 was contested by the international community and led to increasing pressure by foreign countries. The economic sanctions on the Venezuelan oil sector by the US administration deepened the worst economic crisis in Venezuelan history and highlighted the escalating international pressure on Maduro's government.

Despite this evidence, I cannot consider his government as a fully authoritarian regime so far. It can be argued that a completely authoritarian regime requires more than non-democratic features to be considered as such, in addition to more systematic and evident censorship and repression.

In **Chapter 6** I discuss why Venezuela is a case of hybridity, and not just a democratic regime that veered to the authoritarian side. After offering an overall

view of the critical periods of *chavismo*, to identify democratic and authoritarian features that existed from the beginning, and how the erosion of democracy has taken place, I have tried to explain the extension of this hybridity to the Venezuelan political system, and how it got transformed. This part is the aim of the dissertation and reinforces the idea of a dispute over narratives about the same phenomenon.

The work will show how these two narratives look at the same object in divergent ways, and how that contributes to the increased polarization that the country is experiencing now. For *Chavistas*, the process is part of a continuation of the revolution, which is guided by democratic values, like the deepening of mechanisms of direct democracy and the empowerment of the populace. For the opponents, the process is an evident deepening of authoritarianism. Here, I show that this scenario of crisis and intense polarization ends up serving as fuel for both the government and the opposition to justify their points of view and actions, which are not always aligned with the principles of democracy.

In the final part, the **Conclusion**, I summarize the main findings and confirm why the argument for a hybrid regime from the start is stronger than the idea of a transformation process from democracy to authoritarianism.

Research design and hypotheses

This work was built on empirical research of the main developments in Venezuela in the last two decades, which have transformed the political system and led the country to the worst political crisis in its recent history. After preliminary research on the literature of democracy, authoritarianism and hybrid regimes, I tried to list the features that define the three types of political system in order to understand the evolution of democracy in Venezuela.

The interviews were important to gain some perspective from *Chavistas*, in relation to the intense clashes with the opposition that have contributed to the erosion of democracy in the country. Sometimes they work as a confirmation of arguments found in the literature, sometimes not – that is why they are an essential element of the research design for this work.

The main purpose here is to figure out what led to the erosion of democracy in Venezuela. How did the regime become authoritarian? When did it leave the democratic field? In order to understand the transformation process of Venezuela's regime, it is important to establish the main research questions that will help us define what was, and what is, the nature of the *Chavista* political system.

For this debate I propose initially two main research questions:

A - Did the regime change from being democratic to authoritarian due to external factors?

B - Has it always been a hybrid regime, due to the authoritarian and democratic features in its DNA¹²?

This first one implies a hypothesis that there has been a regime change in Venezuela, from an incomplete democracy to a partially authoritarian one, although it has not yet been consolidated as a closed regime as in other countries in Latin America, like Cuba. It also implies that there were authoritarian elements from the conception of *chavismo*, and the way the government and opposition have interacted has contributed to highlighting them.

The second question carries the hypothesis that Venezuela's political system under *chavismo* has always been a hybrid political system. This view implies that at the beginning the regime was more inclined towards its democratic elements (direct democracy tools and referenda), but after clashes with the opposition (i.e. 2002 coup d'état and 2004 recall referendum) and a peak in oil revenue, it turned towards authoritarian aspects (up-down military decision-making style and concentration of power, for instance). It is important to note, however, that this hybridity is not only defined by the lack of democratic or authoritarian elements, but within a process of interaction of loosening characteristics from

¹² As will be seen later in this work, *chavismo* is a potpourri from different groups that composed it.

one side, while aggregating characteristics from another. That means that even a hybrid regime implies a minimum change.

To adjudicate between these views, I will define the main components of a democratic regime, as well as those related to authoritarian regimes and hybrid regimes. Then, I will analyze the shifts that occurred in Venezuela at critical times in the last 21 years, tracking democratic and authoritarian elements in each episode, in order to understand *chavismo's* evolution. The process-tracing analysis will lead to a better understanding about the level of democracy and authoritarianism in different periods of *chavismo* in order to test the hypotheses.

In the end, it will be possible to understand whether the *Chavista* regime was democratic and changed to an authoritarian one, or has been hybrid from the start.

It is noteworthy that a third hypothesis might be required, one that claims that *chavismo* was an authoritarian regime from the beginning. However, I do not agree with this view, as I see the *Chavista* political system is in some ways more democratic than the Punto Fijo years, as explained above.

That said, the process of understanding whether Venezuela's regime changed (A) or has always been hybrid (B) will be developed based on the analysis of the theoretical framework and the interviews made during fieldwork. I also aim to answer some questions derived from the two main hypotheses,:

- How did Punto Fijo lead to the emergence of Chávez, and what variables were responsible? Which characteristics of Punto Fijo did *chavismo* keep and which did it try to discard?

- What was the nature of the regime that emerged after 1998? What was the role of the military in the new regime? What was their conception of politics?

- Did *chavismo* under Chávez have democracy that involved the opposition or was it a revolution that had other purposes and was not prepared to share power with other elites?

- Did the change occur due to the regime's own characteristics or because of external factors? What were the internal/external forces causing change?

- How did the clashes with the opposition contribute to the regime's evolution? To what extent was the peak in oil revenue key to this process?

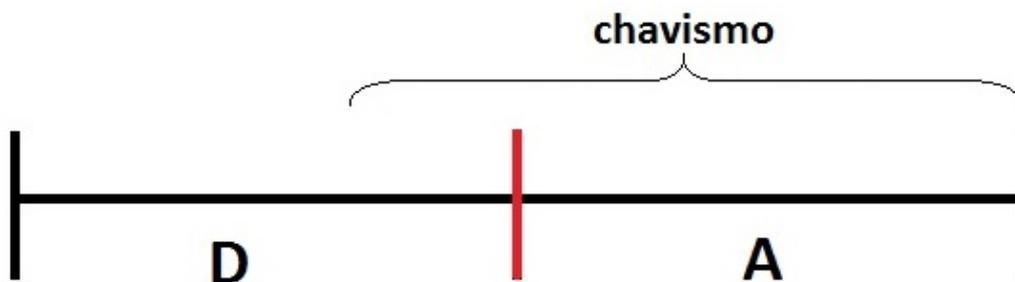
- How has the relationship between the Executive and the other powers been like over the last 21 years?

- What kind of political system has emerged under Maduro?

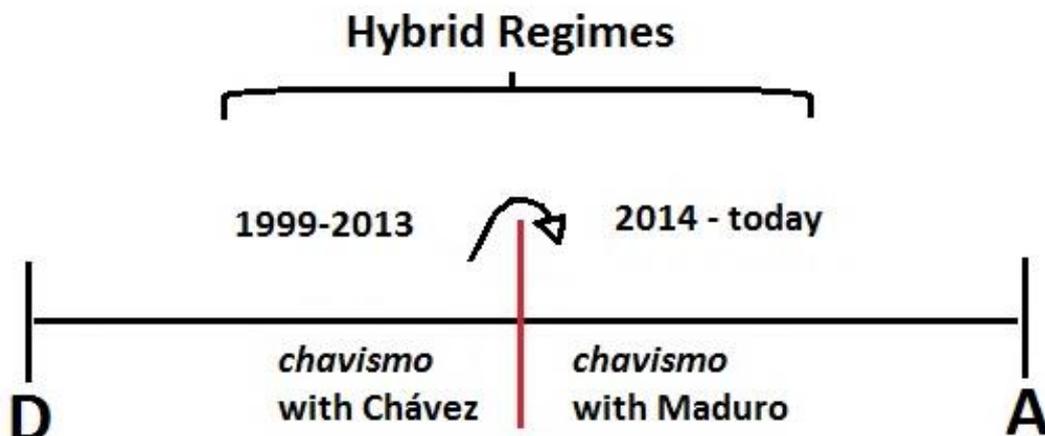
By answering these questions, I aim to figure out which path *chavismo* has mostly followed since 1999. In the following sections I will try to answer them by analyzing the critical moments for *chavismo*, which may lead to explanations.

The main purpose is to understand the historical process of *chavismo's* evolution, and which path it followed most.

Defective democracy (PF, *chavismo*) → Authoritarianism (*chavismo*)



Defective democracy (PF) → Hybrid/ D (Chávez) → Hybrid/ A (Maduro)



If this first evolution process presented above is confirmed during my analysis, then I can argue that *chavismo* transformed Venezuela's incomplete democracy into an authoritarian regime. The democratic features that were present during the *Punto Fijo* years and in the beginning of *chavismo* have been erased by different variables, like political conflicts between government and opposition, and today there are only authoritarian aspects in Venezuelan regime.

But, if the transformation process occurred as shown in the second diagram above, it means that the Venezuelan regime was a defective democracy during the *Punto Fijo* years, and was transformed into a hybrid regime at the beginning of *chavismo*. In this process, the *Chavista* hybrid regime was in the democratic field in the beginning, but has seen an accelerated erosion of its democracy since 2007, when the government tried to implement the main elements of the proposed constitutional changes that were defeated in the polls. Many characteristics of the second phase of *chavismo*, the hybrid on the authoritarian side, started to be introduced at this time.

These authoritarian features have become more clear in recent years – in 2015, for instance, the government did not recognize the legislative election results, indicating a clear rupture with democratic rule. Since then, many democratic elements that were part of the hybrid regime have ceased to exist in the Venezuelan regime, although there are features of a democracy, such as a real opposition to contest the government and press freedom, which prevent Maduro's government from being considered a fully authoritarian regime up to now.

Chapter 1 – Theoretical framework

Based on the work of scholars such as O’Donnell (2010)¹³, Dahl (1972)¹⁴ and Cameron (2018)¹⁵, democracy in its essence is a political system with fair elections, involving alternation between government and opposition. To be considered a complete democracy, a regime must have electoral components, conditions for civil rights and rule of law.

By electoral components, I understand the following: officials acquire the right to hold public office by periodic elections, elections are not fraudulent, all qualified citizens have the right to vote, and eligible citizens can dispute elections. These are indispensable and intrinsic features of contemporary democracy. A political system where elections are fraudulent and eligible citizens are prevented from running for office can not be, therefore, considered a democracy.

Regarding conditions for civil rights, it might be inferred that all citizens enjoy freedom of expression and association, as well as access to alternative sources of information. These features are conditional, that is, without these conditions the intrinsic features of democracy cannot function properly. Dahl also remarks that there are three main requirements for a political system to be considered a democracy: freedom of association, freedom of expression, freedom to vote (p. 5).

¹³ O’DONNELL, Guillermo (2010). **Democracy, Agency, and the State: Theory with Comparative Intent**. New York: Oxford University Press.

¹⁴ DAHL, Robert. (1972). **Poliarquia**. São Paulo: Edusp.

¹⁵CAMERON, Maxwell A. (2018). **Making Sense of Competitive Authoritarianism: Lessons from the Andes**. Cambridge University Press: Latin America Politics and Society. Volume 60, 2.

The third layer of core elements of a democracy is the rule of law and constitutionalism. To be considered a democracy, a political system must have the following characteristics: the State enforces the rule of law, civilians have supremacy over the Armed Forces, and the State is organized to maintain horizontal accountability. For instance, a regime where the military has supremacy over civilians can not be considered a full democracy nor can one in which there is concentration of power in Executive hands, which overlaps Judiciary and Legislative powers.

These three features – electoral components, condition for civil rights and rule of law and constitutionalism – are supportive conditions without which democracy is unlikely to survive, or be prone to crisis and breakdown.

Authoritarianism can be defined as a political system in which incumbents occupy public office by virtue of non-electoral sources of power; they are unwilling to surrender power to the opposition (see Linz, 1978¹⁶; Bobbio and Matteucci, 1983¹⁷ etc.).

In a full authoritarian regime the sources of contestation are eliminated. This can happen in different ways: when the State apparatus is controlled by a small group, opponents are prevented from running for office and sharing power,

¹⁶ LINZ, Juan J. (1978). **Una Interpretación de los Regímenes Autoritarios**. Revista de Sociología, 8.

¹⁷ BOBBIO, Norberto; MATTEUCCI, Nicola (1983). Above-cited.

elections are fraudulent, and alternative sources of information are prohibited. Therefore, there are no legal means to contest the incumbents.

In an authoritarian political system, there is also repression, where opponents and dissidents are systematically punished, pluralism is restricted, there is a pseudo-opposition, and there are civil and political rights violations. Not only are there no legal means for contestation, but there is punishment for those who seek to do so.

In relation to institutions, I would argue that in an authoritarian regime, Legislative and Judiciary powers are subjugated to the Executive branch. There is lack of horizontal accountability and the up-down centralized decision-making clearly appears very often. The concentration of power in Executive hands is more than evident.

Hybrid regimes

Democracies may have traces of authoritarian regimes, like the violation of fundamental rights and freedoms, which eliminates conditions that are necessary for democracy. There may even be partial violations of intrinsic features of democracy, yet a system may retain democratic features. Such regimes are defective democracies (with a lack of democratic elements), and can be considered hybrid as they have acquired authoritarian elements.

O'Donnell (1991)¹⁸, for instance, argues that the lack of horizontal accountability, low levels of checks and balances, concentration of power and occasional abuses by the Executive can lead to “delegative democracies”:

“The President is the embodiment of the nation and the main custodian of the national interest, which it is incumbent upon him to define. What he does in government does not need to bear any resemblance to what he said or promised during the electoral campaign— he has been authorized to govern as he sees suitable” (p. 30).

Since this “paternal figure has to take care of the nation as a whole”, its support may not necessarily come from a political party, but from a movement. That would free him from the internal conflicts that characterize political parties. O'Donnell adds that presidents in delegative democracies place themselves above political parties and organized interests. These elements appear clearly with *chavismo* under Chávez. His political trajectory begins in 1992, with the failed attempt by the MBR-200 to overthrow the Carlos Andrés Pérez¹⁹ government. MBR-200 would only become a political party, the Fifth Republic Movement (MVR), to dispute the 1998 election. MVR, and the subsequently created Patriotic Pole and United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) were all associated – when not subjugated – with Chávez. The main justification for the existence of these political organizations seemed to be the need for Chávez to stay in power.

¹⁸ O'DONNELL, Guillermo (1991). **Democracia Delegativa?** São Paulo: Novos Estudos, nº 31, p.25-40.

¹⁹ In February 1992, a military group, led by Chávez, tried to overthrow then President Carlos Andrés Pérez.. The plan failed and Chavez was arrested.

In a delegative democracy, O'Donnell says, "the boundaries between what is and what is not a political institution are blurred, and they tend to vary over time." In addition, this type of democracy is characterized by a lack of accountability. Accountability to institutions such as the Legislature or the Judiciary, as well as to private organizations proves to be an "unnecessary impediment to the authority" of the president, according to the author. The president thus isolates himself from the institutions and becomes the only person responsible for policy successes and failures.

Another aspect that is important to highlight is that, in contrast to O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986)²⁰ and authors who argue that these types of democracies were part of a process from authoritarian rule to complete democracy, scholars like Merkel (2004)²¹ and Levitsky and Way (2002)²² say that defective democracies are not necessarily transitional regimes and can last for decades, as long as the equilibrium between problems, context and power lasts. The same can be said about hybrid regimes (Morlino, 2009, p. 282)²³.

²⁰ O'DONNELL, Guillermo and SCHMITTER, Philippe C. (1986). **Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions About Uncertain Democracies**. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

²¹ MERKEL, Wolfgang (2004). **Embedded and Defective Democracies**. *Democratization* 11, 5: 33–58.

²² LEVITSKY, Steven and WAY, Lucan A. (2002). **The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism – Elections Without Democracy**. *Journal of Democracy* Volume 13, Number 2.

²³ MORLINO, Leonardo (2009). **Are There Hybrid Regimes? Or Are They Just an Optical Illusion?** *European Political Science Review*, Volume 1, Number 2.

On the other hand, as with democracies that have authoritarian elements, it might be said that authoritarian regimes with democratic characteristics can be considered hybrid regimes as well. A hybrid regime in the authoritarian field would be an authoritarian political system with few characteristics of democracy. It is important to highlight however that this hybrid authoritarianism is more than defective authoritarianism, as it incorporates democratic features.

When a hybrid authoritarian regime starts to lose these democratic features, it may not be considered fully authoritarian. These are incomplete authoritarian regimes as they allow, for instance, opposition groups and maintain democratic practices such as elections and access to alternative sources of information.

Merkel argues that hybrid regimes are hybrid because they carry democratic and authoritarian elements at the same time. A hybrid regime, argues Diamond (2002, p. 24)²⁴, is a defective democracy or an incomplete authoritarian system with features from the other side.

However, Morlino highlights that hybrid regimes can arise out of both democracies and authoritarian governments, and they are the product of changes that begin inside different types of democracies and authoritarian regimes.

²⁴ DIAMOND, Larry Jay (2002). **Thinking About Hybrid Regimes**. Journal of Democracy, Volume 13, Number 2.

“A hybrid regime (...) may also have a set of institutions where, going down the inverse path, some key elements of democracy have been lost and authoritarian characteristics acquired (...) but also failed to acquire characteristics that made them democratic or authoritarian” (p. 280)

It means that hybrid regimes are not defined just by the combination of democratic and authoritarian elements. While a defective democracy is one that loses the main features of a democracy and can no longer consider as one, it can be argued that hybrid regimes emerge from a process in which democratic features are lost and authoritarian elements are incorporated. The same is valid for authoritarian regimes that are considered hybrid.

What leads to this hybridity is what Merkel calls “externally embedded rings”(p. 44), that is, socioeconomic context, civil society and international integration, which can be considered as supportive forces in the shift from a defective democracy or incomplete authoritarian regime to a hybrid one. In the case of *Chavista* Venezuela, this process seemed to be a result of clashes between government and opposition.

It should be noted that, although these regimes are hybrid, it is necessary to retain minimal conditions for membership in one set or the other. When does a democracy leave the democratic field and cross the line to authoritarian rule? Cameron (2018), Diamond (2002), and Morlino (2009) establish a fair electoral process as a red line between democracies and authoritarian regimes. Cameron argues that:

“The crucial difference between democratic and authoritarian regime is whether citizens have the right and power to remove those in public office by means of contestation and participation through institutionalized elections, or whether de facto powers within the political system are able to perpetuate themselves in office through coercion.” (p. 9)

That is the main reason, still in regard to the literature on hybrid regimes, that I do not agree with the concept of “competitive authoritarianism” (Levitsky and Way 2002; Levitsky and Loxton, 2004²⁵). It seems impossible to have competitive elections in an authoritarian regime (Cameron, 2018²⁶). If elections are competitive, then alternation between government and opposition is possible, which would seem to place the regime on the democratic side of the red line between democracies and authoritarian regimes.

It means that in authoritarian regimes democratic elements such as elections and alternation of power are corrupted, there are no meaningful elections and rulers without legitimacy hold power by other means. Furthermore, as pointed out by Morlino, in a democracy electoral features cannot be seen in non-elected actors, such as the military, as can be seen in authoritarian regimes (p. 277).

²⁵ LEVITSKY, Steven and LOXTON, James (2013). **Populism and Competitive Authoritarianism in the Andes**. Coventry: Journal Democratization (University of Warwick), v. 20, n. 1.

²⁶ CAMERON, Maxwell A. (2018). Above-cited.

In his comprehensive work on authoritarian regimes, Linz (1975, p. 297)²⁷ says that the main difference between authoritarianism and a pluralist democracy is that in former, participation is not tolerated nor institutionalized. In authoritarian regimes, the legitimacy of one's power comes from loyal groups, instead of from the people in fair elections. Two subtypes of authoritarianism were coined by Linz: the bureaucratic-military authoritarian regime and organic statism. These can be used to understand the transformation process of *chavismo*, especially under Maduro's government.

In the first one, the military has an expanded role in government and are the main actors of a new type of interventionism, which is possible due to a weak State and failed institutions. In these authoritarian regimes, Linz says, "a coalition predominated by, but not exclusively controlled by Army officers and bureaucrats, establishes control of government" by excluding other groups without commitment to a specific ideology. Since this coalition acts "pragmatically within the limits of their bureaucratic mentality", they don't create or allow a single mass party to play a dominant role (p. 184).

This single party, however, rather than push for a "controlled mobilization of the population", tends to reduce its participation in political life. Such regimes make efforts to operate within a minimal legal framework, through constitutions similar to the Western liberal democracy model and using legal procedures in its

²⁷ LINZ, Juan J. (1975). **Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes**. London. Lynne Rienner Publishers.

favor. These regimes often distort legality, which generates a “perversion of legality”.

Organic statism²⁸ goes beyond the bureaucratic-military authoritarian regime, as it has participation and controlled mobilization. The main feature of this subtype of authoritarianism, however, is the defense of class or corporative interests. Mobilization of society in this case happens through “organic structures”, by rejecting “individualists assumptions of liberal democracy”.

“The theoreticians of organic democracy all emphasize that people are naturally members of numerous groups based on primary social relations, at the work place, farmers’ cooperatives, professional associations, universities, neighborhoods, parishes, etc., in contrast to artificially created larger groups, like political parties, which divide people in those primary contexts (...) Why not organize representation on the basis of such units?”
(Linz, 1975, p. 211)

The Venezuela regime seems to have aspects of both of the subtypes of authoritarianism coined by Linz, even if my work confirms that the Venezuelan regime has been a hybrid regime from the beginning. It is interesting to note, however, that the authoritarian aspects of the *Chavista* regime seemed to occur in the opposite direction proposed by Linz in his typology. Instead of a

²⁸ A similar analysis can be found in the work of Stepan (1978) on Peru. See: STEPAN, Alfred (1978). **The State and Society: Peru in Comparative Perspective**. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

transformation process from a bureaucratic-military to organic statism²⁹, what I see is that Venezuela was more similar to organic statism during Chávez's government, which then turned into a bureaucratic-military authoritarian regime under Maduro – although in both cases I can also identify democratic characteristics that made the regime a hybrid one.

It is possible to argue that the current Venezuelan political system has crossed the line into authoritarian rule. The aim here is to figure out whether the regime changed from a democracy to authoritarianism or has always been hybrid, with characteristics from both sides, but with authoritarian features that intensified over time.

²⁹ Linz also argues that the disillusion with liberal democracy and the capitalist economic system in many Latin American societies has been a fertile ground for the acceptance of corporatist solutions, like organic statism, including the business elite of these countries. (p. 215)

Chapter 2 – Punto Fijo, the populist conciliation system

Chávez ascended to power after years of political crisis and social unrest. In the 1980s and the 1990s, Venezuelans were exhausted with the partyarchy of Punto Fijo³⁰ and were demanding more representation, as well as an end to corruption, and better social and economic conditions (López Maya, 2006)³¹.

The 1980s and 1990s are seen in Venezuelan historiography as decades of intense crisis, represented by Venezuelans' dissatisfaction with the partyarchy system that prevailed during the Punto Fijo period. This uneasy scenario was evidence that of the exhaustion of a model that had existed in Venezuela since 1958 and preceded the arrival of Hugo Chávez in power in the late 1990s.

Several authors³² tried to explain the reasons behind the end of the Punto Fijo period, which couldn't meet the demands of Venezuelan society in the late 1990s, and how Chávez came to power. He represented a rupture with *puntofijismo* because he met political, social and economic demands as the model that had

³⁰ Between 1958 and 1998, the parties Acción Democrática (AD) and Copei alternated in power.

³¹ LÓPEZ MAYA, Margarita (2006). **Del Viernes Negro al Referendo Revocatorio**, Caracas: Editorial Alfadil.

³² See: LÓPEZ MAYA (2006). Above-cited; LANDER, Edgardo. (2000). **Neoliberalismo, Sociedade Civil e Democracia – Ensaio sobre a América Latina e a Venezuela**. Caracas: Universidade Central da Venezuela; GALLEGOS, Raúl (2016). **¿Cuándo se jodió Venezuela? Sobre Cómo El País Con Las Reservas Petroleras Más Ricas del Mundo Acabó Sumido en la Ruina, Otra Vez**. Ciudad de México: Editorial Ariel.

prevailed from 1958 to 1998 was in crisis. His rise to power was, therefore, a break with the status quo of previous decades.

The ascension of the Punto Fijo regime occurred due to a crisis of democracy and the cultural model that existed in 1958, when the Marcos Pérez Jiménez's³³ dictatorship ended. Authors like Caballero (2003)³⁴ argue that the limits between democracy and dictatorship did not become any clearer with the end of Pérez Jiménez's dictatorship. Partyarchy was the essence of the period known as Punto Fijo. Between 1973 and 1989 (p. 119), AD and Copei shared almost 90% of Venezuelan voters.

The Puntofijo Pact between the two parties ended Pérez Jiménez's dictatorship (1952-1958) and was based on a "populist conciliation system", with informal rules, in which businessmen (chamber *Fedecámaras*), unions (such as CTV), the Armed Forces and the Catholic Church had a voice in government decisions (Rey, 1991, p. 270)³⁵. While most of the literature considers the Punto Fijo years a democracy, in my view this period can be considered as a weak democracy, because of power sharing by the main parties instead of a meaningful form of alternation of power. In this regard, as noted by Merkel (2004), the longer an

³³ The military dictatorship of Pérez Jiménez lasted from 1952 to 1958.

³⁴ CABALLERO, Manuel (2003). **La crisis de la Venezuela contemporánea (1903-1992)**. Caracas: Alfadil Ediciones.

³⁵ REY, Juan Carlos (1991). **La democracia venezolana y la crisis del sistema populista de conciliación**. Revista de Estudios Políticos, Número 74.

authoritarian regime persists, the greater the chances that defective democracy will arise, as observed in the Punto Fijo years.

In the early years of Punto Fijo (Uchoa, 2003, p. 100)³⁶, the new civilian government replaced the military dictatorships that had followed the warlords of the independence era. Its 40-year existence, however, was due to one crucial element: oil, whose industry started to be more strongly developed from the 1940s onwards.

The fact that Venezuela is a rentier country makes it different from its neighbours, as the issue of oil permeates political relations as well as external ones. However, this does not make Venezuela more similar to the oil producers of the Middle East. Instead, Venezuela has the typical characteristics of rentier countries in addition to political and historical elements of Latin American countries.

By analyzing the relationship between oil and society and oil and politics, Coronil Ímber (2013)³⁷ shows that in Venezuela the relationship between work as a mean of production and wealth does not exist, and the idea of development and growth lies exclusively in oil production. The incumbents, therefore, are seen as magicians, who have endless power in the face of the abundance of oil resources.

³⁶ UCHOA, Pablo (2003). Above-cited.

³⁷ CORONIL ÍMBER, Fernando. (2013). **O Estado Mágico - Natureza, Dinheiro e Modernidade na Venezuela**. Caracas: Editorial Alfa.

I can see this when I analyze both Pérez Jiménez (1948-1958) and Carlos Andrés Pérez (CAP) (1974-1979), who promoted the idea of Venezuela's progress more strongly than other presidents. The Chávez government, as I will observe later, will hold the same feature in the face of oil abundance. Chávez, in a certain way, took on the image of the magical figure of a leader capable of providing almost endless wealth and distributing it among the poorest.

CAP, who nationalized the oil industry in 1976, is known in Venezuelan historiography for having coined the expression “sowing oil”, that is, using oil revenues to develop Venezuelan industry, with the State investing in basic industry (petrochemicals, steel, aluminum and hydroelectric plants), with the private sector concentrating on the production of goods such as automobiles and textiles. The deep dependence on foreign investment and State subsidies³⁸, however, indicated limitations to the program.

Punto Fijo benefited from the 300% rise in oil prices on the international market under the first CAP government (1974-1979). His successors – Luis Herrera Campíns (1979-1984), from Copei, and Jaime Lusinchi (1984-1989), from AD, – sought to continue CAP's economic policy.

This peak in oil prices on the international market allowed the redistribution of income. Mendes (2012) remembers that while average sectors of society reached

³⁸ MENDES, Flavio da Silva. (2012). **Estado e Direitos Sociais na Venezuela (1958-1998)**. São Paulo: Fundação Perseu Abramo.

levels of consumption unthinkable abroad thanks to the appreciation of the currency against the dollar, the poor sectors enjoyed limited public services. The pact, anchored in oil revenue, worked up to a certain point.

For this political system to work, based as it was on the need for consensus between these actors, a balance of demand and resources was needed, notes Rey (1989, p. 273). In addition to the small number of actors that cemented the pact, it was necessary to exclude from the coalition actors that were incompatible with the aims of alliance members, like the Venezuelan Communist Party, to acquire the confidence of the “masses which receive the benefits in the form of paternalistic donations”. But the idea of growth, understood as an increase in goods and services and the redistribution of oil income, would benefit the actors that formed the alliance before the rest of society.

In the final years of the Punto Fijo pact, says Rey (p. 253), the functioning of Venezuelan democracy was contradictory, with the absence of citizen participation being recognized by the representatives of the elites of very diverse ideologies, which showed that Venezuela was becoming “a democracy without people”, that is, a non-democracy.

In this sense, the creation of the Presidential Commission for State Reform (known as Copre) in 1984, by President Luisini, indicated the need for a new agreement to ensure the democratic principles of the 1961 Constitution. Despite the dynamics of alternation of power working relatively successfully, there were many criticisms on partyarchy from both the elites and the poorest classes. It

was not a case of demagogy or populist democracy, but an anti-popular regime close to authoritarianism (p. 293).

The lack of competition between parties, without equal conditions of association, began to concern sections of the political and business elite, in the midst of unsatisfied demands. In that context, those years were fruitful for leftist movements in Venezuela. In addition to Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV), Venezuelan Revolutionary Party (PRV), MBR-200, and Causa R (Radical Cause), MAS (Movement to Socialism) was rising. The main difference between Causa R and MAS was the first one was more radical while MAS turned to socialdemocrat ideals.

The Venezuelan left

Even before *chavismo*, the Venezuelan left had many ideals whose origins related to the hero of independence, Simon Bolívar. Bolívar was responsible for the “Admirable Campaign”, in which he established the so-called Second Republic in August of 1813. With the support of 500 armed men, he left Merida in the Andes, and marched to Caracas in only four months. (Uchoa, 2003, p. 108)³⁹. The aim of his mission was to free Gran Colombia (currently the territories of Venezuela, Colombia, Panama and Ecuador) from Spain. This explains why the worship of Bolívar is a tradition in Venezuela.

³⁹ UCHOA, Pablo (2003). **Venezuela – A Encruzilhada de Hugo Chávez**. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Globo.

There is a significant difference between this worship of Bolívar and contemporary bolivarianism. Uchoa states that “the history of bolivarianism in Venezuela is also the history of the left betrayed by this country, which has spent years on the margins of politics negotiated in Congress and among the official authorities” (p. 110). It could be said that bolivarianism synthesizes theories of the left – boosted by the Cold War in Venezuela – and also has a civilian-military compound.

In the 1950's, the PCV had started to grow and, incumbents and other political parties tried to prevent it from taking power. Even before the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1950-1958), officials from Acción Democrática (AD) joined forces with the military to isolate the communists in 1944. In the years that Pérez Jiménez was in power, the communists and the Adecos (from AD) were persecuted. The communists started to organize armed guerrillas to overthrow the dictator, while politicians from AD and other parties like Copei advocated other tactics for the opposition. Although both sides were responsible for putting pressure on Pérez Jiménez's dictatorship, the communists were marginalized by the Adecos, who were in power in the years following the Punto Fijo period.

The Communists in Venezuela tried to find their own way, adapting communist principles to the Latin America reality and distancing themselves from the Soviet Union.

Cabellero (1982, p. 20)⁴⁰ recalls that “almost all the communist parties of the region enjoyed a somewhat precarious status of toleration” and were very often considered illegal. The author also says the leaders of the Communist Party of Venezuela were less interested in the Cubans’ ideas (p. 132). “In this sense, the Communist Party of Venezuela seemed to go further than any of their fellow parties in America and in the world, refusing to make any propaganda for a socialist society and socialist revolution”, he says.

That created an important split in Venezuela – the members who broke with the PCV went through the armed struggle with the support of the military and created a new group – the PRV. Uchoa notes:

“In the case of Cuba, Fidel Castro's regime joined the Communist axis led by the Soviet Union for a few years, and Venezuelan revolutionaries preferred to see a Latin America that would follow its own path, distinct from the North American and Soviet models. In addition, Cuba's guerrillas had won the fight against a bloody military regime. In their revolution, Venezuelans imagined a different role for the Army: they advocated for the Armed Forces to form a “civic-military” binomial with civil society, actively participating in the entire revolutionary process. (p.119).

This explains the creation of the PRV in 1966 by Douglas Bravo, a guerrilla who fought in the streets to overthrow Pérez Jiménez with the Armed Forces of National Liberation (FALN), the armed branch of PCV before the creation of PRV. Bravo, an iconic character of the Latin American left, decided to create the PRV as

⁴⁰ CABELLERO, Manuel (1982). **Latin America and the Comintern (1919-1943)**. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.

a dissident group of the Communist Party. He explained that the idea of creating the PRV had to do with a disagreement within the Communist Party: "They expelled us from the Communist Party because theoretical elements from our thinkers clashed with those of the orthodoxy of Soviet thought" (Uchoa, p. 121).

The idea was to incorporate elements from Venezuelan history, such as Bolívar and his teacher, Simón Rodríguez, who defended the idea that Latin America should rely on its own creative people to design its own identity instead of imitating bigger countries. Another inspiration was Ezequiel Zamorra, a *caudillo* considered by many to be the most popular leader of the 19th century. Among their ideas, Bolivarians claimed to be against the oligarchy, to be defenders of peasant and military movements, and in favor of extensive agrarian reform and direct democracy⁴¹ – the people deciding the fate of the nation on the public square (Uchoa, p. 122).

After the decision by PCV to follow the electoral path, Bravo decided to resume the idea of a civic-military coalition as a way of starting the revolution. At that time, the beginning of the 1980s, Bravo began his first contacts with Army members like Chávez. The first meeting between them in 1983 was organized by Adan Chávez, Hugo's brother, who taught social science at the University of the Andes and was part of PRV. At that time, Hugo Chávez was looking for members of the military who were unhappy with the political scene in Venezuela, as well as civilians (some of whom came from Causa R) who would help him to

⁴¹ Which will be pursued by Chávez during his government, as we will see later in this work.

transform the EBR-200 group (Revolutionary Bolivarian Army 200) into MBR-200 (Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement 200) and then MVR, which would lead him to the electoral path years later.

However, Bravo and Chávez went their separate ways, mainly because they didn't agree on the role civilians and the military should have in an uprising. In an interview⁴², Bravo said that *chavismo* had always been a military dictatorship disguised as a civil one. It indicates the differences between Bravo and Chávez on the role the military should have⁴³.

The context in which those left-wing parties arose has to do with the fact that the partyarchy democracy created after 1958 no longer seemed to be sufficient. Rey says, however, that Venezuela at the time was experiencing a crisis not necessarily of its democracy, but of the “populist system of conciliation” that was based on a corporate system of participation and representation, without

⁴² In an interview with the author in Caracas, June 21st, 2019.

⁴³ A part of this can be explained by the sympathy Chávez had for Juan Velasco Alvarado, a general who became dictator and served as the 58th president of Peru, from 1968 to 1975. In 1974 Chávez and military comrades visited Velasco in Peru, which was crucial to his development. According to Giantomasi (2019, p. 220), Chávez used to say that three military governments were fundamental to his background – Velasco from Peru, Omar Torrijos from Panama, and Augusto Pinochet from Chile. “Two of these cases, the Peruvian and the Panamanian, would be studied by Chávez later, as part of his political ascent. On the other hand, he considered the Chilean government of Pinochet as repressive, the antithesis of what he aspired to as a military man”, the author says. See: GIANTOMASI, Santiago (2019). **Profesionalización de Las Fuerzas Armadas de Venezuela - Influencia del Plan Andrés Bello en La Promoción Simón Bolívar II de La Academia Militar de Venezuela. 1971-1975.** Tesis de Maestría. Universidad Federal de Integración Latinoamericana (Unila).

popular mobilization and a tendency to concentrate decision-making processes in the hands of the elites.

The pact, however, started to erode with the fall of oil revenues, which were key to maintaining clientelism and support for these groups, through subsidies to the productive sector, and also to meet social demands (Lander, 2000⁴⁴; Ellner and Hellinger, 2003)⁴⁵.

Two episodes would highlight the crisis of the *Puntofijista* system. On February 28th, 1983, President Campíns devalued the Venezuelan currency, the *bolívar*, leading to the worst economic crisis up to that point. This was also a symbolic and ideological crisis. The episode known as “El Viernes Negro” had a direct impact on the middle class that supported PF governments, who, due to their wealth, had been used to traveling abroad more than twice a year⁴⁶.

The other episode that marked the PF crisis was the *Caracazo*, when social unrest following the increase of bus fares led to demonstrations, looting, and repression by security forces. More than 270 people died in the unrest between

⁴⁴ LANDER, Edgardo (2000). Above-cited.

⁴⁵ ELLNER, Steve; HELLINGER, Daniel (2003). **La Política Venezolana en la Época de Chávez – Clases, Polarización y Conflicto**. Caracas: Nueva Sociedad.

⁴⁶ It is common to talk to middle-class Venezuelans and hear that at that time they used to say: “Está barato, dame dos” (It’s cheap, give me two), as they remember how Venezuelans found many products abroad to be cheap, thanks to the currency exchange value.

February 27th and 28th, 1989. The *Caracazo* reflected the collapse of the “populist system of conciliation”.

Kornblith (1997, p. 1)⁴⁷ notes that, like other countries that opted for relatively radical economic adjustment programs in the 1980s, Venezuelan society has undergone significant simultaneous changes since 1989, with important repercussions for the country's institutional and social structure. In the case of Venezuelan, she says that these changes coincided with three crises: the crisis of the economic model strongly centered on the distribution of oil revenues by the State, the social crisis in relation to the population's expectations and the possibilities of economic improvement, and the political crisis of the model of representation of collective interests and the legitimacy of the model of democracy at that time.

The adjustment implemented by CAP, under an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1989, did not have the support of actors who were part of the Punto Fijo pact, such as Fedecámaras and the Confederation of Workers of Venezuela (CTV). This lack of support was compounded by popular discontent, as expressed during the *Caracazo*. The package agreed with the IMF was oriented to augment the shortage of oil income and the role of the State in its distribution, through the readjustment of fuel prices and taxes such as value

⁴⁷ KORNBLITH, Miriam (1997). **Agenda de reformas e crisis sociopolíticas en Venezuela – una difícil combinación**. II Congreso Internacional del CLAD sobre la Reforma del Estado y de la Administración Pública, Isla de Margarita, Venezuela, 14-18 octubre 1997.

added tax (VAT), as a way to compensate for lower oil revenues.

Mendes (2012) recalls that the economic package called *El Gran Viraje* was announced by CAP on February 16th, 1989. The main message was that sacrifices would have to be made by all sectors of the population. The package was a requirement of the IMF, which had granted Venezuela a US\$ 4.5 billion loan. With the end of exchange control to the readjustment of oil prices in the domestic market, the measures affected the poorest classes with higher prices for consumer goods and public services – the government authorized a 30% increase in fares for buses and other public transportation.

“The new value was announced in the Sunday newspapers, on the 26th. The next morning, however, users found drivers charging an amount that corresponded to twice the amount charged in the previous week. Soon the first conflicts between passengers and drivers arose, especially at the bus terminals of cities on the outskirts of Caracas, from where many workers leave early to work "(p 300)."

The demonstrations started at the *Nuevo Circo* terminal in Caracas, and were joined by university students and informal workers. The protests evolved into barricades, vehicle fires and looting. Some policemen also joined the protesters. The conflicts led CAP to declare a state of exception (state of emergency) the next day, transforming the then democracy into a partially authoritarian regime. The announcement was not enough to bring calm to the streets and the next day the situation got worse, prompting the president to require the help of the

Armed Forces. Estimates made on the basis of morgue lists counted 396 fatalities and 1,000 wounded. The combination of a lack of credibility of the institutions and a deep economic recession was explosive and ended up burying the support Punto Fijo had.

Caracazo was the expression of the crisis in which, for the first time, economic and social problems ended in blood. There was widespread scarcity, when products such as bread, toilet paper, soap, sugar, flour and milk disappeared from the shelves and would reappear on the black market. That year, the Venezuelan economy experienced one of its worst recessions, with a 9% contraction of GDP and poverty increased by a factor of ten in the following eight years.

Since 1989, the direction of social policy has undergone significant changes. Lander (2000)⁴⁸ states that the legitimacy of the Punto Fijo Pact lay with social spending, which was allowed only by the uninterrupted expansion of oil income. This gives the Venezuelan democracy of that time a populist-paternalist-clientelist feature. This dynamic, as I have presented previously, is exhausted by the scarcity of oil income – which was oriented to pay external debt. The two main parties of the *PF* years went from being the main protagonists of the democratization of the country to obstacles to the functioning of democracy.

In addition to the partyarchy of the Punto Fijo Pact, an extremely centralized,

⁴⁸ LANDER, Edgardo (2000). Above-cited.

vertical and presidential political system was established, leaving the Judiciary and the Legislative in a secondary role in relation to the Executive. An example of the level of centralization of power is the appointment of state governors by the President – a topic debated by the Presidential Commission for State Reform (*Copre*) in 1984, along with other points such as the democratization and modernization of Venezuelan society, State reform, political reforms, decentralization, strengthening citizen organizations and expanding democratic participation, which was restricted to political parties and corporate allies, through popular consultations and referenda⁴⁹.

In the social arena, the dynamics that emerged with the neighborhood associations in the late 1970s would be fundamental for the functioning of communal councils⁵⁰ under *chavismo*. The neighbourhood movement, which began with the middle class organizing itself to defend its property, notes Lander (2000, p. 139), became one of the most active voices in the Venezuelan political debate, with criticism of clientelism and interference by parties in all matters of collective life. The general perception was, that in addition to the lack of representation by the parties, there was a significant gap between guarantees of

⁴⁹ KORNBLITH (2014) recalls that the constitutionalization of participatory democracy was a central proposal of Chávez's electoral campaign in 1998, after being debated in the Bicameral Commission for Revision of the Constitution of 1961, between 1989-1992, with antecedents of Copre, created in 1985. See: KORNBLITH, Miriam (2014) **Revocatoria del mandato presidencial en Venezuela: definición y puesta en práctica**. In: LISSINDI, Alicia; WELP, Yanina; and ZOVATTO, Daniel (compiladores). **Democracias en movimiento. Mecanismos de democracia directa y participativa en América Latina**. Ciudad de México: UNAM.

⁵⁰ Conceptually, the citizens' assemblies during the Punto Fijo years could decide on local issues and make requests to the government. They evolved into communal councils, which were also able to receive direct resources from the federal government.

rights and their effectiveness.

This context of great dissatisfaction proved to be explosive. At that moment, says Kornblith (1997), it was difficult to separate the economic crisis from the social or the political one. The economic problems that resulted in social limitations were expressed as dissatisfaction with the status quo and the institutions. Since 1989, the main electoral reforms undertaken by *Copre* were: separate popular elections for governors and mayors, which indicated political decentralization, nominal voting for members of municipal councils, a mixed scheme for the election of deputies of the National Congress and legislative assemblies of the States, with half to be elected unanimously and the other half through lists linked to the parties (p. 10). But perhaps the most important agenda was Constitutional Reform, the debate on which started to emerge in 1989 and began to take shape in 1992, after the failed coup attempt against CAP, as I will analyze in the following paragraphs.

This debate resulted in the figure of the Constituent Assembly, which would become one of Chávez's main banners during the 1998 campaign. Njaim (1998)⁵¹ remembers that in the face of demands that were arising in the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was growing criticism of the State as an institution, accompanied by the discredit of political parties (p. 320). This manifested itself in the pro-Constituent Assembly movement, a proposal to eliminate the political

⁵¹ NJAIM, Humberto. (1998). **Participación, representación y reforma política en Venezuela**. In: Representación política y democracia. Carlota Jackisch (comp.) Buenos Aires, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung- Ciedla.

parties that had led to a corrupt pseudo-democracy (p. 324). At that time, the actors who best illustrated this position were the *Frente Patriótico* movement and what the author would call *chavecismo* (a previous adjective for *chavismo*). The main target would be the intensification of popular participation, through mechanisms of “direct democracy”, which would later be pushed by Chávez in the 1998 campaign.

In February of 1992, three years after Caracazo, a group led by Hugo Chávez, members of the paratroop battalion of Macaray in northern Venezuela, tried to implement a plan to capture president Carlos Andrés Pérez, who was elected again for a new term, and create a power vacuum. The plan failed and Chávez was arrested. But he was able to add civilians⁵² to his MBR-200 towards an electoral strategy.

⁵² In an interview with the author in Caracas, June 19th, 2019, Héctor Navarro, the former *chavista* minister of Education and Electricity, said he and other professors from the Central University of Venezuela (UCV) started the first contacts with Chávez while he was in prison.



After the failed coup attempt of 1992, Chávez and his co-conspirators were arrested. In this picture, Chávez stands next to Francisco Arias (second from right), who later ran for president against him in 2000, and Jesús Urdaneta (center), who signed the recall referendum asking for Chávez to leave the Presidency in 2004. (Reuters)

After Chávez left prison (Smilde and Hellinger, 2011)⁵³, together with comrades from MBR-200, he started to promote his civic-military movement based on popular organizations, the so-called “Bolivarian circles”⁵⁴, which had a triple role: organizing, serving as a channel for demands, and creating and teaching

⁵³ SMILDE, David; HELLINGER, Daniel (2011). **Venezuela’s Bolivarian Democracy – Participation, Politics and Culture under Chávez**. Durham and London (Duke University Press).

⁵⁴ ARENAS, Nelly; CALCAÑO, Luis Gomes (2006). **Populismo autoritário: Venezuela 1999-2005**. Caracas: UCV-Cendes.

ideologies⁵⁵. Chávez sought to mobilize bases, including MBR-200 and professors from the Central University of Venezuela (UCV), such as Jorge Giordani and Héctor Navarro, who would later become part of his Cabinet.

Navarro recalls that when Chávez was arrested, he and Giordani had a political discussion group at UCV. Chávez contacted him to ask someone in the group to go to the prison where he was being detained. "We chose Giordani. Nobody wanted to go because of the repression, nobody wanted to get involved with a political prisoner, but Giordani became a kind of instructor for Chávez," he recalls.

When Chávez left prison in 1994, Navarro and Giordani started to work as a kind of "shadow Cabinet."

"We used to meet with him every week, producing documents etc. The idea was to aggregate the platform demands such as political reform and others. But until 1998, we didn't know how to achieve power. A new military coup attempt? What would be the strategy? We decided to create the MVR. *Movimiento V República* was created in place of MBR ", Navarro remembers.

The cabinet, as revealed by Navarro, was a indication of the civilian-military

⁵⁵ The opposition has always compared the Bolivarian Circles to the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, created by Fidel Castro in Cuba to do social work and revolutionary surveillance.

coalition he started to build at that time. It also showed the lack of a clear aim of the alliance. Would the civilian feature overlap the military one, maybe via another coup, or would civilian supremacy guide the MVR? This dilemma was not clear at that time – and possibly in the subsequent years. Instead of being concerned with shedding the image of a group that in the past had tried to overthrow the government with a coup d'état, Chávez and his allies focused on guidelines like nationalism, the deepening of democracy and a Constituent Assembly, efficient public administration, sovereignty in terms of national resources and decision-making, and popular sovereignty. This became the general platform of the MVR. The idea was to build a participatory and protagonist democracy with popular consultation and referenda. It is important to note, however, that the plan was not the outcome of a debate. It was essentially the “Chávez plan”, Navaro recalls.



A 1997 image of a MBR-200 members meeting. Nicolás Maduro can be seen on the far left, while Hugo Chávez is seen speaking in the center (Wikimedia Commons)

At the end of the PF years, Venezuelans missed the old days, when spending using oil wealth was high, and they sought a firm hand that could put an end to corruption in the government. Chávez, who was involved in the failed coup d'état against Pérez in February 1992, was the person who seemed to have enough strength to do so (Gallegos, 2016)⁵⁶.

López Maya (2003, p. 118)⁵⁷ recalls that thanks to their plan and speech, Chávez

⁵⁶ GALLEGOS, Raúl. (2016). Above-cited.

⁵⁷ LÓPEZ MAYA, Margarita (2003). **Hugo Chávez Frías, su movimiento y presidencia**. In: ELLNER, Steve; HELLINGER, Daniel (2003). Above-cited.

and the MVR managed to capitalize politically on the social polarization that existed in Venezuelan society, enabling the emergence of a political system that, in contrast with the previous one, found in the divisions an important source of political identification⁵⁸. In other words, while Punto Fijo was strengthened by unity, *Chavismo* gained prominence and grew through social division.

Chávez was initially against elections and liberal democracy, but the civilians of his coalition persuaded him to run for election. With this military-civilian coalition, Chávez distanced himself from his rivals in the 1998 campaign by positioning himself in favour of a National Constituent Assembly (Ellner; Hellinger, 2003, p. 63), rewriting the 1961 Constitution, and exploiting the high inequality during the PF decades.

However, much of its electoral platform was not well defined and only held generic values, which actually strengthened Chávez. Regarding this characteristic, Eustoquio Contreras⁵⁹, a member of the Venezuela Unified Socialist Party (PSUV) who was also part of the 1999 National Constituent Assembly, remembers:

“In 1998 Chávez asked us: ‘What do you think? People say that we don't

⁵⁸ Some authors, such as ARENAS and GÓMEZ CALCAÑO (2006) say that one of the strengths of the Bolivarian movement is the ability to take advantage of the division and opposition between corrupt and honest, parties and people, Congress and Constituent etc. The antagonism and dichotomy, therefore, would strength *chavismo*. See: ARENAS, Nelly; CALCAÑO, Luis Gomes (2006). **Populismo autoritário: Venezuela 1999-2005**. Caracas: UCV-Cendes.

⁵⁹ In an interview to the author in Caracas, June 18th, 2019. Contreras was member of 1999 Constituent Assembly and is currently a congressman in National Assembly.

have a government plan or a program.' And we said: 'Don't write a government plan because your strength is *policlasista* (i.e., that you defend everyone, across class divides). There is a speech that encompasses everyone. If you define a program, it will strengthen some social sectors' demands and weaken others. So don't make a program, continue with a speech about equality.' We can literally say, therefore, that Chávez came to the Presidency without having a plan of government, but a discursive electoral offer against corruption, in favour of women etc."

Taking all these elements into account, it might be said that Chávez was trying to confront and end the democracy of the Punto Fijo years that could be considered an oligarchy. This political system, however, set some bases for *chavismo*. All the features of this democracy, including the oligarchic ones, that made the *puntofijista* democracy defective would not disappear just by regime change and would persist or mutate with *chavismo*. Diamond (p. 23) remembers that oligarchic democracies helped to implement institutions in Latin America countries. In Venezuela's case, the extension of the right to vote⁶⁰ was an important tool that preceded Chávez's ascension to power. On the other hand, the role of opposition would remain diminished compared to what it used to be during the PF years. The opponents would change, but the dynamics between government and opposition would maintain many characteristics of the previous decades.

⁶⁰ The first direct elections for governors and mayors in Venezuela were held in 1989.

Dahl⁶¹ classified Venezuela in the 1970s as a “quasi-polyarchy”. For the author, democracies do not exist in practice and regimes are “polyarchies” when there is certain level of public debate and elections are fair. This label can be applied to Venezuela as it maintained a certain public debate among oligarchies and a few parties, and allowed conditions to dispute competitive elections in the Punto Fijo years. The country, however, has moved back to a middle ground between what Dahl classifies as a closed hegemony (when there are no elections or debate) and inclusive hegemony (when elections are held, but the debate in practice does not exist).

After breaking with the partyarchy that prevailed during Punto Fijo, under *chavismo* there was relative competition between parties and conditions for the opposition to confront the government in its initial years. These characteristics, however, seem to have ended up being gradually undermined and diminished.

One of the reasons behind this, Dahl says, is the fact that countries with a long tradition of tolerance, competitive politics and broad participation in general do not return to hegemony. Given Venezuela’s authoritarian past, it is easy to understand why *chavismo* seemed to fail to maintain the necessary requirements of a polyarchy.

It is interesting to note, as highlighted by Merkel (2004)⁶², that the more that the elites are included in the transition, the greater the chance that everybody will

⁶¹ DAHL Robert (1972). Above-cited.

⁶² MERKEL, Wolfgang (2004). Above-cited.

accept the system. That did not happen in the Punto Fijo transition, nor with *chavismo*. This led to an intense conflict between government and other elites that composed the opposition.

In the final years of Punto Fijo, the economic tension that spilled over into the social arena, leading to an increasingly acute polarization, turned into political polarization (Ellner and Hellinger, 2003)⁶³. This feature not only preceded Chávez's election for President but also worsened in the first years of his government until the April 2002 coup, thanks to the rhetoric used by both the government and the opposition.

⁶³ ELLNER, Steve; HELLINGER, Daniel (2003). Above-cited.

Chapter 3 – Rupture with Punto Fijo (1999- 2002)

Constituent Assembly and the new Constitution

Although there is no doubt Chávez was elected by fair means, his victory speaks volumes about the functioning of the democratic system in Venezuela. Venezuelans chose a military man who had tried to overthrow the former government in a coup d'état, to end 40 years of Punto Fijo's defective democracy⁶⁴.

Chávez was elected with 56.2% of the vote and initiated the changes proposed during his campaign on the same day he took office, signing a decree to call a referendum to establish a Constituent Assembly. The tool was not provided by the 1961 Constitution, but had the approval of the Supreme Court. However, critics argued that the Executive could wait until the next legislative elections, instead of creating the "Congresillo" (Petkoff, 2000)⁶⁵ to change the Constitution.

⁶⁴ Although Chávez at this time had a reputation for radicalization, in the election campaign he used to mention the "third way", a concept coined by the former British prime-minister Tony Blair to define an alternative between capitalism and socialism, recalls Germán Ferrer, a former *Chavista* congressman, in a interview by Skype on May 25th, 2019. However, thanks to clashes with the opposition and high oil price, Chávez followed his planned economy path.

⁶⁵ PETKOFF, Teodoro (2000). **La Venezuela de Chávez – Una segunda Opinión**. Caracas: Grijalbo.

The 1999 Constituent Assembly had been demanded by many Venezuelans since the 1980s. Of its 128 seats, 122 were filled by Chávez's Patriotic Pole party, 3 were appointed by the president to represent indigenous peoples and the rest were filled by members of the opposition. As the government wanted to vote on final text of the new Charter by the end of that year, the constituents began to debate over a draft that had already been prepared by Chávez. Among the main points was ministerial reform, to change the number of ministries from 24 to 14, as well as the introduction of mechanisms of direct democracy like the consultative and recall referenda and the communal councils. These would become the core of the direct democracy system, where the idea was to complement the participatory democracy of the previous decades.

Instead of a sign of power, the call for the Constituent Assembly indicated the lack of real power that Chávez had when he arrived at the Miraflores Palace, in Contrera's view.

“Chávez is a consequence of improvisation. The aim of the 1999 Constituent is to give the new model a constitutional structure. Chávez tried to seize power through the 1992 coup, but failed. He ended up doing it through the electoral route. The government won, but it had no power. All public power was in opposition hands, and constitutionally he could not move forward. That is why he called the Constituent Assembly, which was not only for a new Constitution, but also aimed to reduce the already constituted Public Power that was in the hands of his opponents.”

On the other hand, it might be said that Chávez knew that the extension of his

political power was legitimate – while the opposition, despite controlling the Legislative power and other institutions, were delegitimized. That said, I can see that the push for the Constituent Assembly to rewrite the Constitution was received with concern by the opposition, which saw the new incumbent overcoming the Supreme Court and installing a super Legislative with a *chavista* majority⁶⁶. These episodes were seen as an attack on the system and an erosion of the rule of law.

The proposal to rewrite the Constitution was approved by 85% in the referendum. After rewriting the Charter, Chávez called for new elections in 2000, and emerged victorious with 59.7% of the vote. Some authors argue that the elements of a plebiscitary democracy⁶⁷ started to rise at this point and would be used to support the government's decisions.

The 1999 Constitution can be considered an improvement on the 1961 Charter. There are many similarities between the two Constitutions, but the 1999 one contains instruments designed to increase democratic participation and vertical accountability like referenda to revoke officials, as well as incentives for local organizations to make demands to the government (Smilde and Hellinger,

⁶⁶ More than 90% of the 131 seats in the Constituent Assembly were filled by *chavistas*.

⁶⁷ Some scholars argue that by using referenda to guide government policy, Chávez transformed electoral democracy into a plebiscitary one, which lacks legitimacy. See: JIMÉNEZ, Alfredo. (2006). Above-cited.

2011)⁶⁸. At this point, more ways and means of contestation were being created – even for the opposition – and Chávez was building its support among Venezuelans.

The authors say that Venezuela was transformed by the 1999 Constitution on two main fronts: economic and political. In the economic sense, the structure moved towards a broad process of renationalization. In the political sphere, the government's public intention to increase the participation of citizens gave *Chavismo* a uniqueness when it came to power compared to other countries in the region. Mechanisms of direct democracy foreseen in the 1999 Constitution ended up recreating the sense of collectivity and even the dynamics between institutions and Venezuelan society.

Executive power supported movements that had begun during Punto Fijo, such as the Urban Lands Committee and the Technical Water Committee. Chávez was successful in mobilizing and incorporating these groups and people who had never participated in political activities outside the home before. This, according to the authors, would be one of the reasons behind his popularity.

On the other hand, the new Constitution established a unicameral legislature, an arrangement that weakened checks and balances⁶⁹, and suppressed the

⁶⁸ SMILDE, David; HELLINGER, Daniel (2011). **Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy – Participation, Politics and Culture under Chávez**. Durham and London (Duke University Press)

⁶⁹ PETKOFF, Teodoro (2000). Above-cited.

'apolitical' and 'non-deliberative' status of the Armed Forces, which existed in the 1961 Constitution (Blanco, 2002)⁷⁰. Furthermore, the military not only performed defense and security tasks, but also the logistics of social programs (*misiones*) through Plan Bolívar 2000. Hellinger (2003, p. 64)⁷¹ notes the plan was an audacious attempt to unite military capacity with those of the public administration to tackle social problems such as health care and education-welfare would be one of the main platforms of *chavismo*⁷². The military started to occupy spaces where only civilians had been before, which threatened civilian supremacy over the Armed Forces – one core feature of democracy.

The author recalls that the program had an immediate effect in the short term and showed the public that a civic-military alliance was positive and that the military existed to help and not just to repress the population – as it seemed to do in the *Caracazo* episode, in which the Armed Forces violently repressed demonstrators.

⁷⁰ BLANCO, Carlos (2002). **Revolución y desilusión – La Venezuela de Hugo Chávez**. Madrid: Catarata.

⁷¹ ELLNER, Steve (2003). **Visión política general: la caída del puntofijismo y el surgimiento del chavismo**, in ELLNER, Steve; HELLINGER, Daniel (2003). Above-cited.

⁷² Two examples of the welfare state brought by Chávez are the Macroeconomic Stabilization Fund (Fiem), designed to compensate for an eventual fall in commodity prices fall, and the Single Social Fund (FUS), which would finance the so-called *misiones* (social programs). The resources of FUS, according to its law-decree, would come from both Fiem and the Federal Budget, as well as international donations. See:

<https://docs.venezuela.justia.com/federales/leyes/ley-de-creacion-del-fondo-unico-social.pdf>

Plan Bolívar 2000, says Norden (2003)⁷³, clearly tried to put the military close to the lower classes, while trying to point out the inefficiency of the old regime. In this way, the presence of the military was extended to civilian life – from security issues to their role in social programs.

Moreover, the new Constitution incorporated important innovations that changed Venezuela's institutional framework, such as the expansion of Public Power beyond the Executive, Legislative and Judiciary, by incorporating Electoral Power and Citizen's Power.

It is important to highlight, that, in theory, participatory democracy should coexist with formal government institutions. In practice, however, it ended up overlapping them and created conflict between government and opponents in public office. According to the former minister of Industry Víctor Álvarez⁷⁴, at first, the forces that came from representative democracy and those that came from the “new” participatory democracy that new government was trying to boost, tried to coexist. Álvarez recalls that in the beginning, social movements and local communities were organized, empowered by urban land committees and *mesas técnicas de agua*, with the participation of residents who sought solutions to water scarcity or debated land expropriation processes to organize cooperatives. Communal councils were the culmination of this process, and

⁷³ NORDEN, Deborah (2003). **La Democracia en Uniforme: Chávez y las Fuerzas Armadas**, in: ELLNER, Steve; HELLINGER, Daniel (2003). Above-cited.

⁷⁴ In an interview with the author in Caracas on June 19th, 2019. Álvarez was part of the first Chávez Cabinet, acting as minister for Industry.

brought these initiatives together.

But the communes, which would be the territorial expression of the new communal power, soon began to enter into conflict with the previous political-administrative division. Álvarez remembers that they emerged as parallel structures, which became prioritized in the State structure, although they were on the margins of the Constitution:

“This is because this new Power was not based on municipal councils and city halls. Thus, these new forms of popular and social organization began to clash with mayors and governors, who asked that resources not be transferred directly to communal councils and communes without their approval.”

According to Álvarez, this generated a great level of tension with traditional political elites and even with *Chavista* governors, who started to break with Chávez.

The origin of this dispute, it should be added, is related with to the concept of democracy in Venezuela. The idea of what democracy is differs between *chavistas* and their opponents. Mallén and García (2019)⁷⁵ note that the 1999 Constitution defines “democracy as ‘participatory and protagonist’, rather than

⁷⁵ MALLÉN, Ana L.; GARCÍA-GUADILLA, María Pilar (2019). **Polarization, Participatory Democracy, and Democratic Erosion in Venezuela’s Twenty-First Century Socialism.** The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 681(1), 62–77.

'representative', with the aim of including the previously excluded sectors of society". By doing this, "the Charter started to exclude previously dominant groups (mainly the middle and upper classes), who then became the political opposition".

"The Bolivarian Constitution included both representative and participative models of democracy but did not specify the mechanisms for their coexistence and implementation. In practice, this ambiguity led to two mutually exclusive models of democracy. One was the democratic model of representation, supported by the opposition, and the other, supported by Chavistas, was the radical or "communal" model based on a participatory-protagonist framework." (p. 10).

The authors also add that the liberal democracy model, which prevailed during the Punto Fijo years, emphasizes individual civil and political rights. The communal democracy, proposed by Chávez, privileged direct citizen participation and collective, socioeconomic and cultural rights. This environment has resulted in polarization and disputes concerning constitutional rights.

The *Chavista* military-civilian coalition seemed to prioritize direct democracy tools, to the detriment of representative democracy. These intrinsic forces were accompanied by the systematic use of referenda and elections, which gave support to government policies.

It might be said that at this point *chavismo* was weakening the rule of law, a feature of democratic regimes, where the military had supremacy over civilians, and signals of low horizontal accountability began to emerge.

Leyes Habilitantes

The 1999 Constitution was received with apprehension by the opposition and sectors that were part of the populist conciliation pact in previous decades. However, the trigger of the crisis that led to the 2002 coup was the package of 49 *Leyes Habilitantes* that Chávez managed to pass in the Legislative Assembly in November 2000. The tool allowed the Executive power to rule without Legislative approval (Vivas, 1999)⁷⁶ – which highlights the lack of horizontal accountability.

As of November 2001, Chávez had published 53 enabling laws. Among them, only 23 were reforms of existing laws. Two of them ended up fuelling the dispute between government and the private sector, the core opposition in Venezuela: the Hydrocarbons Law and the Land Law. The first one established that the State should have the major share in partnerships with foreign oil companies. The aim of the second one was to nationalize private lands considered unproductive. Both were seen by the private sector as obstacles to foreign investment.

⁷⁶ VIVAS, Leonardo (1999). **Chávez – La Última Revolcuión del Siglo**. Caracas: Editorial Planeta Venezolana.

Perhaps Chávez didn't realize that he was helping to form a large opposition front in the productive sector, which called for the revocation of these laws (Uchoa, 2003, p. 237)⁷⁷. By December of 2001, Fedecámaras, represented by Pedro Carmona, and the CTV union, organized the first general strike against the government. The movement had the support of managers of PDVSA as well as political opponents.

But *chavismo* seemed intent on pushing forward with its project, even without non-ally support. Perhaps it was because it was a revolution that the regime was not prepared to share power and decision making with other elites. Here, the intrinsic revolutionary force that had the aim of breaking with the status quo had come into conflict with the opposition, a dynamic that led to the erosion of democracy.

The *Leyes Habilitantes* amounted to the first evidence of conflict with the legal system in the process of rewriting the new Constitution and led the opposition to think that Chávez was not committed to the rules and that his government would not contemplate democratic ways.

These steps were not totally undemocratic, but excluded the opposition from the decision-making process. The reaction of opposition groups was to attack the regime in an attempt to overthrow it. It meant that sources of contestation were

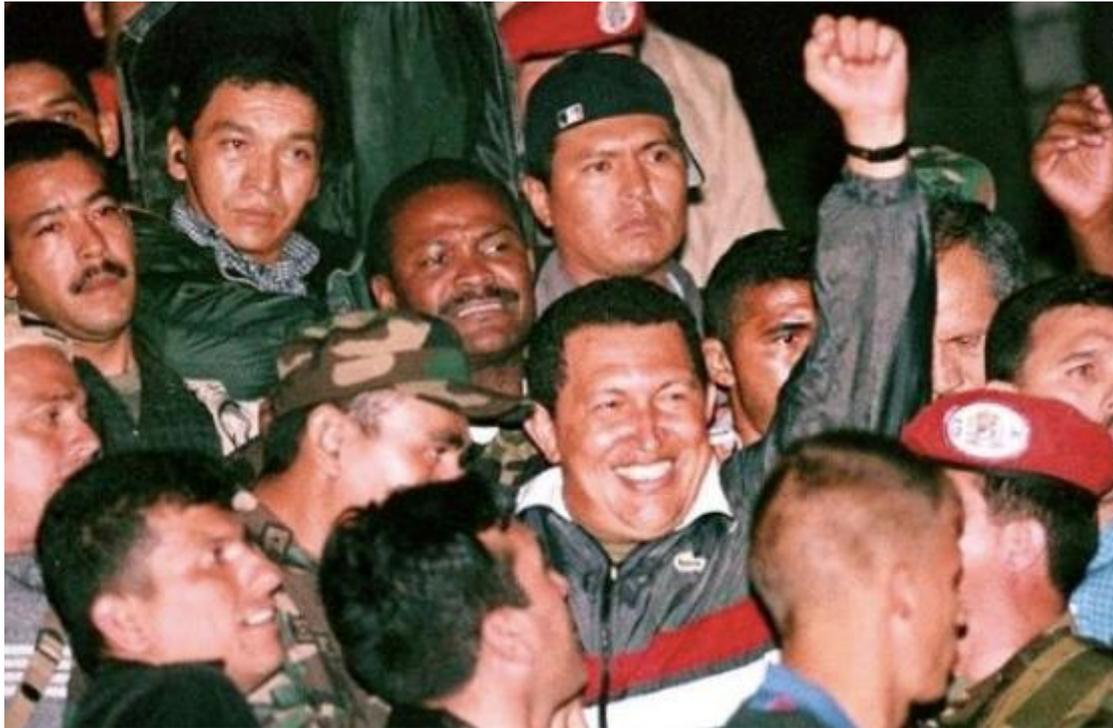
⁷⁷ UCHOA, Pablo (2003). Above-cited.

eliminated and a systematic up-down centralized decision-making dynamic was emerging.

The 2002 coup and oil sector strike

Protests and strikes increased with the help of CTV⁷⁸, and the situation worsened between February and April of 2002, with some senior Armed Forces officers unsure of government authority. The CTV-Fedecámaras alliance orchestrated a 24-hour strike on April 9th, with a second one on April 11th. The latter led to the coup d'état in which Chávez was ousted for 47 hours and replaced by Carmona. The opposition decided to contest the government by non-democratic means. This clash would be one of many, and partly explains the recrudescence of the regime.

⁷⁸ ELLNER (2003) recalls that it was not only the political parties whose legitimacy was questioned, the unions also faced this problem throughout the 1980s. CTV, for instance, was seen as one of the axes of the PF political system, but lacked its characteristic of being a channel for proposals and workers' representation. CTV's image was weakened in the 1990s in a process marked by lower mobilization strategy, submission to *Acción Democrática* and resistance to internal reforms in order to strengthen the union movement (p. 213). On December 9th, 1998, three days after Chávez was elected, Uchôa (2003) recalls that CTV sent a letter to him to discuss topics such as inflation, unemployment, wages and collective agreements. The letter, signed by the then president of CTV, Federico Ramírez León, was an attempt by the union to distance themselves from the old regime and approach the new government (p. 230). However, Chávez ignored it. He repeated that it was necessary to end the "old corrupt union leadership", and created his own union, the Bolivarian Workers' Front. In 1999, the Constitution draft National Electoral Council (CNE) was the new body responsible for organizing elections for union members. The directive was a source of controversy. Furthermore, in October 2000, Chávez managed to get National Assembly approval for a union referendum in which the voters could say whether or not they agreed with the elimination of the CTV, raising the level of tension.



Chávez survived the 2002 coup orchestrated by the opposition and was subsequently strengthened (Telesur)

After the coup, there was a third strike in October, and a fourth one in December, specifically in the oil sector. This put pressure on the government and resulted in 18,756 layoffs at the state oil company PDVSA.

The coup was decisive: it dictated a new direction for the country's politics and marked the loss of Chávez's innocence, according to former national *ombudsperson* Gabriela Ramírez⁷⁹. She remarks that Chávez now realized the need to control both political institutions and the main companies of the productive sector in order to strengthen his power, and for him to avoid ever

⁷⁹ In an interview with the author by Skype, on May 26th, 2019.

being put in a vulnerable position again, something which had almost seen him being ousted from power.

“With the coup, Chávez thought: ‘They almost replaced me because I have no control over institutions, PDVSA and the productive sector. If I don't control them, how can I resist a new economic blockade?’”, Ramírez notes.

The different versions and the dispute over the coup's narrative still exist to this day. It is hard to affirm that Chávez actually resigned. Carmona, in his autobiography⁸⁰, says that Chávez had already agreed to resign and be part of a transitional government. According to Carmona, César Gaviria, then Secretary-General of the Organization of American States (OAS), even accepted Chávez's resignation. Carmona took over as acting president on April 12th.

After the decree-law package and the call for a general strike, the move to overthrow Chávez led him to order the activation of Plan Ávila, a military contingency strategy to maintain order (La Fuente and Meza, 2004)⁸¹, between soldiers who supported Carmona and those who followed Chávez. One of those who supported him was Defense minister Vicente Rangel, who, according to the authors, prevented Chávez from signing his resignation. "Don't sign, Hugo, so it

⁸⁰ CARMONA, Pedro Estanga. (2004). **Mi testimonio ante la historia**. Caracas: Editorial Actum.

⁸¹ LA FUENTE, Sandra; MEZA, Alfredo. (2004). **El Acertijo de Abril – Relato periodístico de la breve caída de Hugo Chávez**. Caracas: Editorial Debate. The book was published in 2004, but this note is still valid nowadays.

will look like a coup."

Documents from that year put into question whether there was, in fact, a coup d'état that ousted Chávez from power. In one of them, dating back to April 13th, Chávez released a letter in which he resigned. In another, from the same date, Chávez denies having resigned (La Fuente and Meza, pp. 168, 187)⁸². Perhaps the most controversial of them is the Constitutional Act of the Government of Democratic Transition and National Unity (p. 177), about the guidelines of this transitional government, in which Carmona is sworn in as interim president. It is curious that the document is from March 10th, 2002, a month before the events that took power from Chávez for 47 hours. The document raises the possibility that the plan to remove him from power and put Carmona in the Presidency, had been in place even before the general strikes.

At this point, clashes with the business sector, unions and traditional political parties fortified the revolutionary side of *chavismo*, compromising the elements of a democratic system.

The episode clearly shows that opponents did not believe Chávez was operating under a certain degree of rule of law. Chávez's behaviour, in order to survive in power, showed that he was trying to secure better control of institutions like the Armed Forces and PDVSA. In other words, neither side recognized the legitimacy of the other.

⁸² LA FUENTE, Sandra; MEZA, Alfredo. (2004). Above-cited.

The dispute between the government and opposition put into question core features of the democratic system and led to the emergence of the non-democratic features of *chavismo*, which was the most important outcome of the process. The opposition tried to play by democratic rules, while *chavismo* increased control over the institutions and restricted pluralism, by punishing members of the elite, like PDVSA staff. The clashes between the two sides were one of main reasons why Venezuela's process followed a more authoritarian direction.

The next point of tension between Chávez and the opposition would be the recall referendum on August 15th, 2004. McCoy and Diez (2011)⁸³ recall that “throughout this period, the international community paid close attention to Venezuela” (p. 160), as the recall referendum was the first vote after the 2002 coup. Institutions like the OAS, the United Nations (UN) and the Carter Center were following the process closely. The authors add that then UN general-secretary, Kofi Annan, communicated to Chávez the importance of dialogue. In another meeting, with then presidents Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Brazil) and Vicente Fox (Mexico), Chávez said he was receptive to making observer regulations (for international observers) more flexible. Brazil also sent a team of “e-voting” experts “to make a private assessment of Venezuelan voting machines”.

⁸³ MCCOY, Jennifer; DIEZ, Francisco (2011). **International Mediation in Venezuela**. Washington: United States Institute of Peace.

More than 3.2 million signatures were collected for the recall vote. The referendum took place, and Chávez was victorious. But the signatures collected were leaked in the so-called *Tascón List*. The data was given by the National Electoral Council (CNE) to Chávez's campaign command, and the names of the voters were published on the website of *Chavista* congressman Luis Tascón.

Those who appeared on the list were fired from public office and denied rights and access to public services. Kornblith (2014, p. 154)⁸⁴ observes that the list violated the right of secret voting and paved the way for reprisals against opponents. The author also says that the list showed a particularly critical and questionable aspect, perverting the secret voting rule (p. 154). At that time, she argues, nobody responsible for the defense of citizens' rights, such as the Ombudsman's Office or the Attorney General's Office, spoke out against the violation, nor was the deputy sanctioned.

The episode shows how the opposition tried to contest the government by democratic methods and Chávez reacted in an authoritarian way. The lack of autonomy of the electoral body, for instance, reflected the undermining of institutions. In the end, the referendum outcome fortified Chávez and eroded the credibility of elections from that point onwards.

⁸⁴ KORNBLITH, Miriam (2014) **Revocatoria del mandato presidencial en Venezuela: definición y puesta en práctica**. In: LISSINDI, Alicia; WELP, Yanina; ZOVATTO, Daniel (compiladores). **Democracias en movimiento. Mecanismos de democracia directa y participativa en América Latina**. Ciudad de México: UNAM.

With the referendum, Chávez had the chance to reinstitutionalize the country. He would govern with more legitimacy, with the opposition posing as a legitimizer of his administration. Villa (2005, p. 166)⁸⁵ recalls that *chavismo*, at that period, “was strongly legitimised in cleavages that went beyond the political” aspects. Equally, the result of the referendum would help to neutralize, and even isolate, the most radical sectors of the government and the opposition, and the violent practices and rhetoric, and constant appeals for the rejection of democratically instituted rules. However the outcome in reality was:

“Chávez’s victory in the referendum might cause the political system to become less pluralistic in regard to the representation of the different political forces, causing an excessive concentration of power in the Executive and Legislative bureaucracy”(p. 168).

Based on Linz and Stepan’s definition (1996)⁸⁶ of hybrid democracies – where some democratic institutions coexist with nondemocratic characteristics – it could be said that this episode marked the change from a weak democracy during Punto Fijo, with minimum alternation of power, to a hybrid regime, with fair elections to contest the government and authoritarian elements, like subjugating institutions to the Executive power. The 1999 Constituent Assembly

⁸⁵ VILLA, Rafael (2005). **Venezuela: political changes in the Chávez era**. *Estudios Avanzados*, 19 (55), 153-172.

⁸⁶ LINZ, Juan J.; STEPAN, Alfred (1996). **Toward Consolidated Democracies**. *Journal of Democracy* 7,2.

and previous events highlight the lack of democratic elements in the Venezuelan political system, but in 2004, it went further , with authoritarian aspects emerging more clearly, as we can see in the Tascón list episode.

Despite the authoritarian elements that arise at this point, I consider that *chavismo* was a hybrid regime at that time. The main reasons for this opinion are that the recall referendum and Chávez's reaction to it, which demonstrate both the democratic and non-democratic features of the regime. This means: by allowing a popular vote that could have seen him ousted from power, Chávez pushed a democratic tool in an attempt to strengthen the electoral component, as well as his government's legitimacy. On the other hand, leaking the names of those who were opposed to his government, thus punishing dissident voices, was clear evidence of the authoritarian side of the system

Morlino (2009, p. 293⁸⁷) argues that all hybrid regimes have, at some point, an authoritarian past, with clear advantage to the dominant party. The high degree of deinstitutionalization and the important role the military played in the government, characterize *chavismo* as a hybrid regime at that time. This seems to be the case of Venezuela, where a history of dictatorship and defective democracy preceded the *Chavista* hybrid regime.

⁸⁷ MORLINO, Leonardo (2009). **Are there hybrid regimes? Or are they just an optical illusion?**. European Science Review, 1:2.

Opposition abstention in 2005 and re-election in 2006

One year after the recall referendum, the opposition seemed to give up⁸⁸ on institutional ways to contest the government and abstained from the 2005 legislative elections. However, the strategy to boycott the elections was a miscalculation, as it gave more power to the Executive branch. Chávez felt free to govern without obstacles.

Luis Lander, from the Central University of Venezuela (UCV)⁸⁹, notes that the opposition boycott allowed *chavismo* to govern without checks and balances. This empowerment was bolstered by his re-election in December of 2006, when he got 62.8% of the vote. This context, according to Lander, “allowed Chávez to see himself as strong enough to push new Constitutional reform”. Up to then, even without checks and balances to challenge the government, there had still been some political room to contest the government, but the opposition decided not to take part in 2005.

⁸⁸ Gamboa (2016) says that between 1998 and 2005, the opposition had institutional resources, which it could have used against Chávez's concentration of power. After the approval of the 1999 Constitution, the opposition had a significant presence in the Parliament and the Supreme Court. However, by using extra-institutional strategies, such as coups, strikes and boycotts, the opposition wasted most of these resources. See: GAMBOA, Laura (2016). **Venezuela: Aprofundamento do Autoritarismo ou Transição para a Democracia?** *Relações Internacionais*, nº 52, p. 55-66.

⁸⁹ In an interview with the author in Caracas, on June 25th, 2019.

One year later, in December 2006, Chávez was re-elected with 62.8% of the vote. Lander recalls that Chávez sought to expand the scenario of governing without checks and balances, basically by choosing *Chavistas* as members of institutions like the CNE. This would allow Chávez to govern without restrictions, an aim that would become clear in the second phase of *chavismo*, as Lander notes:

“With that, Chávez ensured that powers that should be autonomous, were now being loyal to him. This whole context, especially after his re-election in 2006, made Chávez think that he was strong enough to reform the Constitution again and that he would be victorious by proposing that, regardless of the content of the new Charter.”

The boycott in 2005 can also be considered a clash between opposition and government. The opposition seemed to realize that Chávez was not willing to act under the minimum degree of rule of law and decided to quit the democratic process. In this case, even the opposition diminished the importance of electoral components, by refusing to participate in elections. The decision in itself, and its consequences – fewer checks and balances, which fortified the Executive power – undermined the democratic features of the political system in Venezuela.

Chávez’s re-election in 2006 strengthened *chavismo* policies of that time, and helped to weaken the opposition even further.

Chapter 4 –Chávez Empowered (2007-2013)

Strengthened by his re-election and the loyal Legislative, Chávez pushed his 21st-century socialism project. Initially, the idea was to modify 33 articles of the Charter, but the *Chavista* National Assembly doubled the number of articles to be modified.

The constitutional referendum of 2007

According to Lander (2008)⁹⁰, the proposal presented some controversial issues, such as Popular Power, the 21st-century socialism project and the end of term limits. “What is the purpose of Popular Power as one of the spheres of Public Power?” asks Lander. Was it an attempt to govern outside the institutions? Making popular organizations (the communal councils) part of the State could have had advantages in the short term, he argues (immediate access to resources, for example). However, in the medium term it would work as a mechanism for the State to control these groups.

The author points out that in the proposal it was not possible to specify what exactly the “Socialist State, socialist democracy, socialist participation and socialist economy” were. The new Charter, he notes, seemed to propose a model

⁹⁰ LANDER, Edgardo. (2008). **El Referéndum Sobre La Reforma Constitucional. El Proceso Político En Venezuela Entra En Una Encrucijada Crítica**. Caracas: Revista Venezolana de Economía y Ciencias Sociales, no 14, v. 2, pp.131-163.

of society with a very strong role for the State as owner and regulator, with a highly centralized project, in which the public sphere had an increasingly partisan political feature.

Chávez stated that in order to achieve socialism, it was necessary to go through a transition stage in which the State would deepen the new forms of political and citizen participation and consolidate the new power in a system whose fundamental cell was the communal councils (Víctores and García, 2017, p. 9)⁹¹. Ramírez assumes the communal councils were unconstitutional, because the idea was to bypass municipalities and transfer resources directly to communes, without having to go through mayors:

“In an attempt to strengthen local production, Chávez created the communal councils, with the idea that the approval of resources no longer had to go through the mayors. The communal councils were unconstitutional, but we did not mind going around the Constitution to serve the superior will of the people. They were unconstitutional because legally the smallest territorial political unit is the municipality, and it was not possible to transfer resources to the communal council without going through city hall.”

⁹¹ VÍCTORES, Iván Porfirio Santos; GARCÍA, Miguel Ángel Hernández (2017). **Cuba y el Socialismo del Siglo XXI**. JURIS, Rio Grande, v. 27, n. 2, p. 11-23, 2017.

López Maya (2013)⁹² adds that Popular Power would not be established by universal suffrage but by local group decisions. The proposals meant that incumbents could be chosen by non-democratic means and alternation of power would be hindered, as many local groups were loyal to Chávez. Furthermore, it showed that the aim wasn't to respect the Constitution, but rather to implement the *Chavista* project. It also highlighted the weight of *Chavista* revolutionary purpose to break with former institutions, as well as promoting direct democracy instead of the representative one.

Also in 2007, there was another remarkable episode, the creation of Venezuela's United Socialist Party, the PSUV – a coalition of the *Chavista* MVR and minor parties like *Pátria para Todos* (PPT). According to Linz (1975, p. 162)⁹³, a single party that does not have grassroots or ideology, but rather has a mentality that always referenced generic values such as patriotism, is a characteristic of authoritarian regimes.

Given the aspects above, it might be said that *chavismo*, at that time, was acquiring authoritarian features – expressed in the radical changes proposed to the Constitution – which would come into conflict with both the democratic

⁹² LÓPEZ MAYA, Margarita. (2013). **El Estado Descomunal**. Caracas: Los Libros de El Nacional.

⁹³ LINZ, Juan J. (1975). **Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes**. London. Lynne Rienner Publishers. In a previous work, Linz (1964) added that authoritarian regimes are political systems “without elaborate and guiding ideology (but with distinctive mentalities); without intensive nor extensive political mobilization (except at some points in their development)”. See: LINZ, Juan J. (1964). **An Authoritarian Regime: Spain**, In: ALLARDT, Erik and LITTUNEN, Yrjö. **Cleavages, Ideologies and Party Systems – Contributions to Comparative Political Sociology**. The Academic Bookstore, Helsinki.

system and the opposition. The changes would damage the rule of law and the political system, as the State couldn't maintain minimal levels of vertical and horizontal accountability. Furthermore, with Popular Power tending to include only *Chavistas* in the decision-making process, the State apparatus was being controlled by a small group and sources of contestation were being suppressed.

Implementation of the 21st-century socialism project

Chávez was defeated at the polls. In the referendum that proposed to amend 69 of the 350 articles of the 1999 Constitution, 51% voted against and 49% in favour. The president called the result a “shit” victory, but accepted it. However, he pushed to modify parts of the Constitution by decrees in the following years. Using the tools of the democratic system, the idea was to continue with the 21st-century socialism project, which had been announced in 2005 as a new stage of the Bolivarian Revolution⁹⁴.

The Popular Power Law, for instance, was approved by Congress in 2010 and the end of term limits was submitted to a new referendum in 2009, in which *chavismo* won by 54.85% of the vote. The need to alternate power, a requirement of democracy, had been eroded.

Although the idea of constitutional change had been defeated, the *Chavista*

⁹⁴ In his 90-minute speech at the 5th World Social Forum, in Porto Alegre, Brazil, Chávez said that the only way to break up with capitalism is through the revolution and socialism. See: <http://www.albatv.org/Hugo-Chavez-El-capitalismo-debe.html>

government promoted a series of changes that were included in the proposal, which ended up consolidating authoritarianism. One of these was the Organic Law of Popular Power. The government stated that Venezuela would be taking a step forward, transcending representative democracy, towards the construction of a participatory democracy.

According to the law, the purpose of Popular Power was to “generate conditions to guarantee that the popular initiative, in the exercise of social management, assumes that the functions, attributes and competencies of administration, the provision of services and execution of works, are transferred from the various political-territorial bodies to the community, communal self-governments and the aggregated systems that arise from them”. The main object was the construction of a communal State, that is, a type of political social organization (...) in which power is exercised directly by the people, with an economic model of social property and sustainable endogenous development, whose fundamental cell is the commune⁹⁵.

On February 15th, 2009 a new referendum was held, this time for indefinite term limits for popularly elected positions. The proposal won 54.85% of the vote.

At this point, *chavismo* explicitly started to differ from the original project. This change can be attributed to the characteristics of the regime itself, as well as a closer relationship with Cuba (López Maya, 2013) and the influence of some

⁹⁵ **Ley Orgánica de las Comunas**. See:

http://www4.cne.gob.ve/onpc/web/documentos/Leyes/Ley_Organica_de_las_Comunas.pdf

Neo-Marxist intellectuals.



Cuba's Fidel Castro and Chávez, in Havana (Associated Press)

Defining 21st century socialism has always been an arduous task, even for *Chavista* officials. Despite the rhetorical attempts by the Venezuelan government to try to differentiate 21st century socialism from 20th century experiences, the model proposed by Chávez had similarities with what happened in the Soviet Union and Cuba. 21st-century socialism, therefore, can be understood as a mix of the USSR and Cuba regimes as well as Neo-Marxist theories.

What Karl Marx defined as "phases" of communist society, the Marxist tradition later called "socialism" and "communism", with socialism meaning a transitory society for an entirely communist mode of production (Bobbio and Matteucci, 1983)⁹⁶. In the line interpreted later by Vladimir Lenin⁹⁷, the authors recall, communism would have as its principle an almost unconditional subordination of the economic, cultural and ideological fronts to the political front, which is guided by the revolutionary party. They recall that the Soviet Union countries established the dictatorship of the "Marxist-Leninist" party, which can also be defined as the "dictatorship of the proletariat".

“(...) socialism, in its transition phase, became an autonomous social formation, characterized by the emptying of the original forms of grassroots-democracy, the authoritarian concentration of powers by the bureaucratic apparatus of the State and the party, and the reproduction of deep inequalities and acute social conflicts.” (p. 1.211)

Later, however, the Soviet Union's 1977 Constitution stated that “all power in the USSR belongs to the people, who exercise it through the soviets (communal councils)”, and the Communist Party guides Soviet society, constituting the core

⁹⁶BOBBIO, Norberto; MATTEUCCI, Nicola (1983). Above-cited.

⁹⁷ Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov (1870-1924), Lenin, was a Russian revolutionary, politician, and political theorist. He served as head of government of Soviet Russia from 1917 to 1922 and head of government of the Soviet Union from 1922 to 1924. Under his administration, Russia and the Soviet Union became a one-party communist state governed by the Russian Communist Party. He developed a variant of Marxism known as Leninism.

of its political system (Segrillo, 1999)⁹⁸. We can find some similarities between the soviet model and *chavismo*, as the decision-making by PSUV and Chávez overlapping other spheres of the political system and social organizations.

Cuba's 1959 Constitution⁹⁹ introduced Popular Power as an institution, and the communal councils as the primary cell of the political system. Popular Power, in accordance with articles 198 and 199 of the Constitution, has in its essence the popular council, which represents the population of the territory where it operates and "exercises control over local production and service entities".

Regarding the structure of the economy, perhaps the main elements of 21st century socialism also come from the Cuban model. According to articles 18, 19 and 20 of the Charter, in Cuba there is "a system of socialist economy based on the ownership by the people of the fundamental means of production". In this system, the State "drives, regulates and controls" economic activity, conciling national, territorial, collective and individual interests".

The Cuban Constitution recognizes a few types of property: socialist (where the State is the owner and acts on behalf of, and for the benefit of the people), cooperative (supported by collective work and principles of cooperativism), political, mass and social organizations, private (when the means of production

⁹⁸ SEGRILLO, Angelo de Oliveira (1999). **Reconstruindo a "reconstrução": uma análise das principais causas da Perestroika soviética**. Tese de doutorado. Niterói: Universidade Federal Fluminense.

⁹⁹ **Constitución de la República de Cuba** (1959).

are exercised by persons, where there is a complementary role in the economy), and mixed (managementd by institutions or associations of assets that do not constitute the means of production, which are controlled by the State).

Other strong influences on Chávez were István Mészáros¹⁰⁰, who defends a communal system as an exchange of activities instead of products, based on “common needs and purposes” defined by the State, and Atillo Borón¹⁰¹, who advocates against neoliberalism and globalization, by proposing default on external debt, as well as universal social policies and agrarian reform.

Mészáros would defend the idea of social work within a communal system, which has characterised *chavismo* since then:

“The work of the individual is posed from the beginning as social work. You therefore have no particular product to exchange. Your product is not an exchange value. (...) Instead of a division of labour, work that is necessarily created in the exchange of values, there would be an organization of work whose consequence would be the participation of the individual in communal consumption.” (p. 866)

Thus, unlike the system of division of labour in which the market society prevails, the communal system would be defined by an “exchange of activities and not simply an exchange of products, far from the idea of fetishism in the exchange of

¹⁰⁰ MÉZSAROS, Ivstán. (2002). **Para Além do Capital**. São Paulo: Boitempo Editorial.

¹⁰¹ BORÓN, Atilio A. (2010). **O socialismo no século 21: há vida para o neoliberalismo?** São Paulo: Expressão Popular.

goods in the capitalist system” (p. 875). For Mészáros, the transition from an exchange system based not on values, but on activities determined by “common needs and purposes”, would have to be planned by the State.

Flying the flag against neoliberalism and the advance of globalization in the region is the core of Attilo Borón’s writing, one of Chávez’s favourite authors. The sociologist makes a fierce criticism of Latin America countries in the early 2000s for liquidating social security and welfare systems in favour of globalization. He offers a guide for countries in the region that seek alternatives to the “neoliberalist” model. He proposes the cancellation of external debt because in his view it contributes to increasing poverty. The author recalls the case of Argentina’s economy, which after defaulting on its debt in 2001, managed to recover without the help of foreign capital.

Borón also suggests aggressive policies against universal poverty and argues that without the social protection established in “Keynesian state standards”, capitalism is ratified as “an unstoppable machine to manufacture poverty” (p. 59). He also proposes agrarian reform and the reconstruction of regulatory market frameworks in order to end the privileges of large companies and monopolies. He states that governments that want to overcome the “painful legacy of neoliberalism” must promote a new development strategy, focusing on the domestic market, because “no country has grown or developed based on the growth of exports” (p. 72).

It is noteworthy, however, that the stronger ties with Cuba, which started to

provide logistic support to Venezuela, was crucial to the advance of the socialist project in Venezuela. Cooperation between Cuba and Venezuela began in the early years of Chávez's government (Gombata, 2016)¹⁰², with the presence of Cuban doctors in Venezuelan territory. These health care workers helped in operations to assist survivors after the so-called Vargas Tragedy, in early 1999, when landslides left thousands dead and missing in Vargas State. Months later, an agreement was signed with the Cuban government to "import" doctors from Cuba into the poor communities of Caracas, which ended up being expanded to other areas in the interior of the country. This partnership started in the health area and was extended to the education, security and intelligence sectors.

This approach coincided with a period of greater radicalization of *chavismo*, according to some authors (López Maya, 2013)¹⁰³. The new state that Chávez wanted to move forward with, she says, had strong Cuban and left-wing intellectual influence, as I have already presented above. López Maya notes that ideas came more from abroad than from Venezuela and these supported a paradigm shift towards a communal state.

It might be said that the regime changed due to its intrinsic revolutionary elements, which were bolstered by deepening ties with Cuba and the influence of Neo-Marxist authors. The objection to the 21st century-socialism by opponents

¹⁰² GOMBATA, Marsílea (2016). **Política social e política externa: a atuação de médicos cubanos em programas da Venezuela, da Bolívia e do Brasil**. Dissertation. Master in Political Science. University of Sao Paulo

¹⁰³ LÓPEZ MAYA, MARGARITA (2013). Above-cited.

created an even more fertile environment for conflict – by sending signals that he would impose his project by non-democratic means, Chávez put the opposition on alert again.

On the other hand, notwithstanding the fact that there were still means for the opposition to contest the government, *chavismo* reacted to the defeat by trying to implement the proposals by decree, which highlighted the lack of horizontal and vertical accountability. By ignoring the referendum result, the government made the institutions less functional.

The creation of a “head of government”¹⁰⁴ in 2008, to replace city halls controlled by opponents, also reflected the erosion of the institutions. It could be said that the political system was in the process of losing democratic features while acquiring authoritarian elements – typical of hybrid regimes.

In the first years of *chavismo*, observers of Venezuelan democracy had believed that Chávez would be “socialized” by the country’s consolidated democracy. “Forty years of stable democratic government created a deeply rooted democratic culture in which the president must operate”, argued Petkoff¹⁰⁵ in 2001. This did not seem to be the case.

¹⁰⁴ After Antonio Ledezma, from Acción Democrática party, had been elected to Caracas city hall on November 23, 2008 with 52% of the vote, Chávez signed a law that created the post of “Head of the Government of Caracas”, a new administrative figure in charge of almost all local issues, from police to schools and budget, which in practice annulled the powers of the elected mayor. See: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-42033152>

¹⁰⁵ PETKOFF, Teodoro (2000). Above-cited.

Some authors argue that the Venezuelan electoral system had started to be destroyed under Chávez's government, and that his successor, Nicolás Maduro, merely finished the job. Corrales (2020)¹⁰⁶ notes that in more than 20 years of *chavismo*, there have been 177 election irregularities in 24 electoral contests. However, he states that electoral fraud consists of “deliberate attempts to miscount or suppress the vote on voting day, typically through illegal acts”, while the concept of electoral irregularities is a broader one which includes electoral fraud and the manipulation of rules and norms around elections, such as fraud, infrastructure disruptions, coercion of voters, and rules affecting the pre-campaign, campaign, and post-election periods (p. 44). *Chavista Venezuela* has shown more examples of irregularities than frauds *per se*.

Although 2007 was a key moment in the hardening of the regime, it is difficult at this point to say that there was electoral fraud on referendum day. I could say that it was a case of electoral irregularity after the post-election period. The implementation by decree of some topics of the proposed constitutional reform indicates a certain degree of manipulation of rules of the game. It might be said that until that point they had been trying to adapt the defective democracy that was inherited from Punto Fijo to their necessities. After 2007, *chavismo* seemed to attempt to develop an alternative model of rule. The episode is a moment in

¹⁰⁶ CORRALES, Javier (2020). **Democratic backsliding through electoral irregularities: The case of Venezuela**. *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*. January-June, pp. 41-65, n. 109.

which the hybrid regime lost even more of its democratic features and, evidently, acquired more authoritarian aspects.

Furthermore, this period coincides with a process of increasing tension between *chavismo* and the opposition, and an attempt to suppress dissidents and institutions dominated by opponents. Álvarez highlights the rupture with important allies like the former minister Raúl Baduel. Baduel, the general who joined Chávez's coup attempt against CAP in 1992 and saved him from the 2002 coup, ended up in prison after opposing the 2007 constitutional reform. It might be said that sources of contestation were eliminated here, in a process in which the State apparatus was controlled by *Chavistas*, and the Legislative and Judiciary were subjugated to the Executive.

Oil price explosion

The oil price peak was a crucial conditional variable in the strengthening of non-democratic elements of *chavismo*. When Chávez came to power in 1999 the price of Brent Crude was around US\$ 17.90 per barrel, and the OPEC crude oil price was US\$ 17.40 per barrel. In 2008, they jumped to US\$ 96.90 and US\$ 94.10, respectively, until reaching a peak at US\$ 111.60 and US\$ 109.40 in 2012¹⁰⁷.

¹⁰⁷ Statista. See:

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/262860/uk-brent-crude-oil-price-changes-since-1976/>

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/262858/change-in-opec-crude-oil-prices-since-1960/>

This increase benefitted Chávez greatly: it freed him from alliances with the entrepreneurs. It was therefore a necessary – although not sufficient by itself– condition for the emergence of the authoritarian aspects of *chavismo*.

This argument can be supported by a counter-factual analysis. If Chávez hadn't benefitted from the oil price increase, would it have been possible to implement his project of massive social programs to improve social indicators¹⁰⁸ and boost his popularity? Would it have even been possible to nationalize factories and import almost all goods that were consumed in the country? The former minister of Industries Victor Álvarez, says no:

“If Chávez hadn't had the oil price recovery in his favour and the increase in oil revenue¹⁰⁹, he would have been forced to negotiate with business and reach an agreement with the private sector. He wouldn't have been able to carry on without entrepreneurs as he did¹¹⁰. ”

¹⁰⁸ GOMBATA, Marsílea (2016). Above-cited.

¹⁰⁹ In 2005, for instance, Chávez created the National Development Fund (Fonden) to manage oil income directly. The creation of Fonden was not submitted to the National Assembly. Its creation was just published in the *Gazeta Oficial* on July 20th, 2005.

¹¹⁰ In this process, Álvarez recalls, the national productive apparatus was also dismantled without any evident problem with scarcity. The government controlled the inflow of dollars and fixed the exchange rate unilaterally. “He ended up setting a very low price to be able to cheapen imports and compete with products from national entrepreneurs. Then he started to say: 'Businessmen produce medicines for that high price, and we sell them for half'. He was able to import everything and, at the end of the day, the entrepreneurs remained as speculators, ambitious, *acaparadores* (accumulators). It was an ideological battle.” For Álvarez, Chávez used exchange rate policy as an instrument to exercise political control. With the State controlling 96% of dollars entering the country, the businessmen, who were his opponents, did not have access to dollars to import materials for production.

By not having to follow traditional alliances thanks to the oil price peak, Chávez felt empowered, which led him to ignore some rules of the democratic game, as I pointed out in the previous section.

This was a time when there was great tension within *chavismo* itself and an increasing movement to suppress dissidents and institutions dominated by opponents. In this period there was also what Álvarez calls “the colonization of other public powers”, with the end of autonomy for the Supreme Court of Justice, National Assembly and CNE, whose members were no longer as neutral and, in general, had a past of militancy in *chavismo*.

What allowed the emergence of this authoritarian bias, in which the Executive overlapped all other Powers and institutions, was the oil price peak on the international market, according to Álvarez:

“Expressions of tolerance, consensual solutions and acceptance of criticisms started to disappear at this time because Chávez had the support of oil resources. In my view, this process of authoritarian drift accelerated in direct proportion to the increase in oil prices. As prices rose and the State’s income increased, Chávez felt able to confront those he considered enemies.”

Again, the dispute between government and opposition helped to erode democratic features of the regime and led to the rise of non-democratic aspects. By trying to control political institutions and the economy – through foreign

exchange rates and the productive sector – Chávez increased the tension with the opposition and, as a consequence, the process of deterioration of democracy accelerated in Venezuela.

Re-election in 2012, Chávez's death and Maduro's ascension in 2013

Chávez was re-elected for a fourth term in October of 2012 with 54.5% of the vote. *Chavismo* under Chávez won almost all elections between 1998 and 2012, but sometimes used undemocratic practices after the 2002 coup – the government repeatedly prohibited candidates from running for office and when elected officials from the opposition won office, they had their functions restricted and budgets cut (Cameron, 2018, p. 12).

Following Chavez's death by cancer in March of 2013, vice president Nicolás Maduro assumed power and called for new elections. The presidential election was held before the previously scheduled date and the opposition requested its annulment, which increased the tension among the parties from the start of Maduro's mandate. For opponents, Maduro was violating the rules and eroding the institutions to favour himself.

With Maduro, this scenario of a restricted playing field for the opposition, the persecution of opponents, and a growing militarization in the Cabinet, would all increase – while the process of loosening democratic features and obtaining

authoritarian features inherent to *chavismo* would accelerate in the following years.



Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez, left, holds up a copy of the Venezuelan national Constitution, accompanied by his then vice president Nicolás Maduro and Diosdado Cabello, then president of the National Assembly, at Miraflores Presidential Palace in Caracas. This photo was taken on December 8th, 2012, three months before Chávez's death. On that day, Chávez announced that his cancer had returned and named Maduro as his successor (Associated Press)

Limitations of our analysis

At this point I find that the analysis of this period of hardening of the regime is difficult: there are many obstacles, not to say deficiencies. I conclude that the description presented here is quite complete, but the explanation could be seen by some observers as unsatisfactory, due to the opaque nature of the way

government acted toward the institutions, and the aims of the 21st century-socialism project.

This is a difficult time for the *Chavista* regime, a controversial period that divides opinion. Some scholars (López Maya, 2003; Corrales, 2020) argue that 2007 is the beginning of authoritarianism in Venezuela. I don't agree, however, because up to that point it was possible for the opposition to contest and to halt, in some way, aspects of the 21st century-socialism project. Clearly, I don't have all the information that could explain exactly the intentions of Chávez and his project at that time. If I had had access to private conversations or classified documents that indicate that the aim of the *Chavista* project at that time was to install an authoritarian regime, I could clearly say that Chávez tried to push the country towards authoritarian rule. However, based on the evidence that I have so far, it is difficult to affirm that. What can be said with certainty is that the government tried to develop a new political model, in which essential aspects of democracy were not prioritized. That led to an increase in authoritarian bias within *chavismo*.

The borders of the *Chavista* political system are not always clear, and the regime swings like a pendulum, sometimes towards authoritarianism, sometimes towards democracy. Based on the main elements of democracies and authoritarian regimes that were listed at the beginning of this dissertation, it could be said that Venezuela at this point had many authoritarian features, but also had characteristics that are intrinsic to democracies. The regime can still be

placed in the democratic field at the time of Chávez– the crossing of the red line will come later, under his successor, Nicolás Maduro.

Chapter 5 – Crossing the red line (2014 - today)

Nicolás Maduro came to power in March 2013 and called elections for April of the same year. The pre-election period was immersed in controversy. As Cameron recalls (2018, p. 12), “the election of Maduro in April was closer than previous elections, and the opposition requested an annulment”. That didn’t prevent the election from being held and, in the dispute marked by a high level of tension, Maduro defeated Henrique Capriles, leader of the opposition party Primero Justicia, by 1.5 percentage points, obtaining 50.66% of the vote.

It could be said that until 2013 it was possible for the opposition to contest the government and the government had legitimacy. The elections were used as a tool to endorse the government’s legitimacy and diminish the level of polarization with the opposition. But external pressures – the collapse of oil prices, the country’s worst ever economic crisis, and international sanctions – strengthened the authoritarian bias of *chavismo* and led Maduro to cross the line that separates democracy from authoritarianism.

His government has been marked by a series of violations of political rights and State control by a political group, with a more restricted playing field to challenge the incumbents, as well as abuse of the Executive that made minimum standards for a democracy impossible.

There are a variety of examples of maneuvers used to prevent the opposition from a requirement to have a qualified majority in the National Assembly in

2015, to not holding the recall referendum in 2016, from the gradual withdrawal of duties from the National Assembly to the implementation of a new Constituent Assembly, which has been overlapping other powers since 2017.

Other examples of the “packing” of powers like the CNE and Supreme Tribunal of Justice (TSJ) with Maduro's allies, and strong repression of dissidents and opponents, dozens of deaths and hundreds of detentions, an increase in the number of political prisoners¹¹¹, the blacklisting of opponents capable of challenging the government at the polls¹¹², and a series of purges within *chavismo* itself¹¹³. According to Andreani (2018)¹¹⁴:

¹¹¹ According to Caracas-based NGO Foro Penal, the concept of a “political prisoner” is based on three definitions: 1: Those arrested or convicted for individually representing a political threat to the government, because they are political or social leaders. In these cases, the purpose of detention is to exclude the person from the political world, to neutralize them as a factor of social or political mobilization, isolating her/ him from the rest of the population. Category 2: Someone arrested or convicted, not because she/he represents an individual political threat to the regime, but because they are part of a social group for which intimidation is necessary. This is the case of students, human rights defenders, communicators, judges and military, social and political activists, among others. Category 3: Those who, even without being considered a political threat by the government, are used to sustain a specific political campaign or narrative of power over certain situations of national relevance.

For further information see: <https://foropenal.com/presos-politicos/>

¹¹² Like the former mayor of Chacao, Leopoldo López, the former mayor of Caracas, Antonio Ledezma, and the former governor of Miranda, Henrique Capriles

¹¹³ The ombudsperson Gabriela Rodríguez, the general attorney Luisa Ortega and her husband, the congressman Germán Ferrer, are a few examples of Chavistas who broke with Maduro in 2017.

¹¹⁴ ANDREANI, Fabrice (2018). **Las Vías Enmarañadas del Autoritarismo Bolivariano**. Buenos

“(…) this regime combines classic authoritarian traits (…). There is a coercive protototalitarian style, both in the form of systematic public harassment against opposing groups or perhaps "traitors" (dissidents), and the requirement to register party preferences – including voting – as a condition for socio-humanitarian aid benefits.” (p.47).

Based on all the evidence available, the degradation of the political system has clearly accelerated after Chávez’s death, say Mallen and García-Guadilla (2017, p. 144) ¹¹⁵. The challenge here is to figure out how the process has taken place since Maduro came to power.

Recrudescence and oil price collapse

In 2014, Maduro faced serial protests against issues like violence by security forces, shortages and high inflation – the annual rate was around 63.4% at that time. The strong repression of dissidents and opponents during the protests resulted in 4,000 imprisonments and 43 deaths. The repression occurred while there was an increasing number of political prisoners, pressure on opponents in public office and also *Chavistas*, as previously mentioned.

The number of political prisoners exploded during Maduro’s first years in power.

Aires: Nueva Sociedad, n. 274, 44-58.

¹¹⁵ MALLÉN, Ana L.; GARCÍA-GUADILLA, María Pilar (2017). **Venezuela’s Polarized Politics: The Paradox of Direct Democracy Under Chávez**. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.

According to figures by the NGO Foro Penal, in January 2019 there were 857 political prisoners in Venezuela, including 100 members of the military, and incumbents like opposition mayors. When Maduro came to power, according to Foro Penal, the total number of political prisoners was around 13¹¹⁶.

In the institutional arena, the recrudescence is clear when we see the many attempts to “colonize” powers like the CNE and TSJ by filling them with Maduro’s allies, as stated previously. The electoral body and the judiciary branch were filled with *chavistas* loyal to Maduro – a dynamic that has continued in recent years, as I will analyze in the following pages¹¹⁷.

The restrictions on opponents and the increasing social dissatisfaction were accompanied by the beginning of the worst economic crisis in Venezuela’s recent history. The severe repression by the government that began in 2014 preceded the oil price collapse in 2015. Here again, the price of oil appeared to be a necessary condition to push Venezuela to partial authoritarianism, but not a sufficient variable capable of undermining Venezuelan democracy by itself.

¹¹⁶ In the December 2017 report, the NGO also shows that 760 civilians were presented and tried in military courts. See more at: <https://foropenal.com/2018/02/16/reporte-la-represion-venezuela-2017/>

¹¹⁷ For further information see: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017/608791/EPRS_BRI\(2017\)60879_1_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017/608791/EPRS_BRI(2017)60879_1_EN.pdf)

This time, however, the sharp fall was a determining factor. The average oil price fell from US\$ 108.56 per Brent barrel in 2013 to US\$ 53.35¹¹⁸ two years later. The main source of dollars necessary to import basic good started to shrink. The government seemed to resort to authoritarian practices and a combative rhetoric in order to justify repression and divisive measures, and maneuvers to undermine the tools to challenge the incumbents.

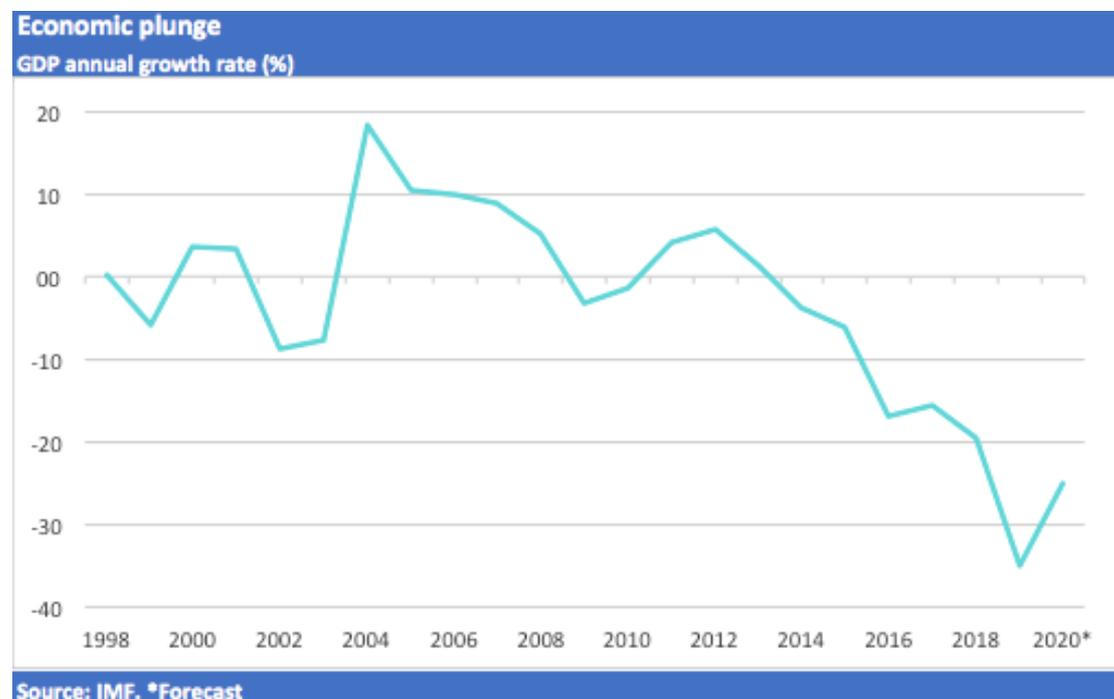


Chart 1. Contraction of Venezuela's economy in recent years¹¹⁹.

¹¹⁸ Statista. Above-cited.

¹¹⁹ Source: International Monetary Fund (IMF).

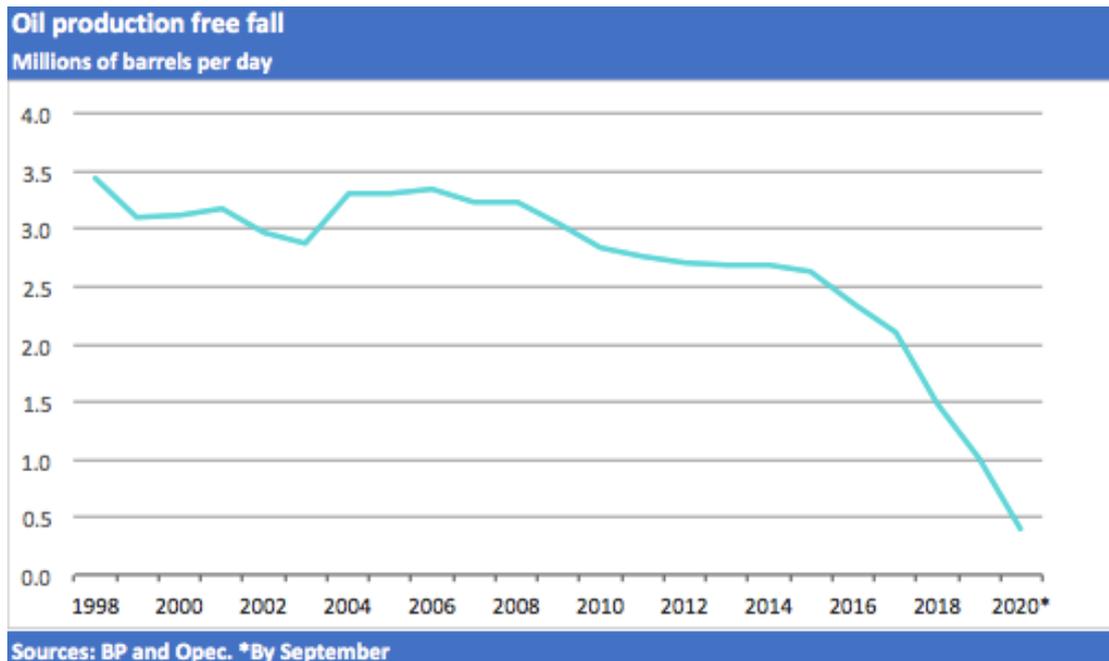


Chart 2. Oil prices variation over the years¹²⁰.

Legislative elections in 2015

The turning point in *chavismo*, however, would come at the end of 2015, with legislative elections. The results left 112 of 167 seats in the National Assembly in opposition hands, but the Supreme Court prevented four elected congressmen, three opponents among them, from taking office because of allegations of voting fraud in Amazonas State¹²¹. That prevented the opposition from holding a supermajority in Congress, as well as the ability to remove ministers, approve the national budget and appoint members to the Supreme Court and electoral body without the need of an alliance with *chavistas* in Parliament. The Supreme

¹²⁰ Source: BP and Opec.

¹²¹ For further information see:

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-politics-idUSKBN0UE01C20151231>

Court, mainly *Chavista*, maneuvered to suppress a legal challenge to the government.

The legislative election marked the return of the opposition with enough force to challenge the government by playing the political game and indicated a breaking point, with a minimum level of democracy, according to Edgardo Lander:

“From that point, a new stage began, a very strong authoritarian deviation. The government decided to ‘move the revolution forward’, despite the election results”, Lander says¹²².

Corrales (2020)¹²³ recalls that electoral irregularities also emerge when the ruling party is not popular and faces the risk of losing elections. “Under conditions of non-competitiveness, the president panics” (p. 52), he says, noting that irregularities that emerge in the context of presidential insecurity occur at a greater speed and go deeper than in any other context. This seems to be the case of 2015. In the legislative election of that year, electoral irregularities became electoral fraud, in which officials miscounted the vote.

As with 2007, 2015 was also a key moment of the hardening of the regime, when it became possible for the international community to say definitively that *chavismo* would not allow the opposition to hold office if it threatened their

¹²² In an interview with the author.

¹²³ CORRALES, Javier (2020). Above-cited.

power. It could be argued that this was underway in 2007, while in 2015 *Chavistas* were able to execute it without any subtlety.

The episode showed that the government was not prepared to share power with a *non-Chavista* Legislative, which could be seen as a trace of the revolutionary features of *chavismo* and led to intense clashes with opposition and the erosion of the democratic project. Among the democratic features that were diminished, I can highlight electoral components such as officials having to acquire the right to hold public office by periodic elections, and elections that are not fraudulent.

The government crossed the red line and the Venezuelan political system went from a type of hybrid regime defined by Zakaria (1997, p. 22¹²⁴) as illiberal democracy – regimes where leaders don't respect the rule of law, separation of powers, protection of liberties and leaders who usurp their powers – to a partial authoritarian regime. The main authoritarian elements presented here are the lack of horizontal accountability, with Legislative and Judiciary powers subjugated to the Executive branch, and an up-down centralized decision-making process.

Although these elements are more common in authoritarian political systems, I still argue that Venezuela at this point could still be considered a hybrid regime. Authors like Corrales (2020) argue that the 2015 legislative elections will go down in history as the moment in which the regime became fully authoritarian. However, I don't agree with this statement. In my view, it is not accurate to say

¹²⁴ ZAKARIA, Fareed (1997). **The Rise of Illiberal Democracy**. *Foreign Affairs*, 76, 6.

that Maduro's government is a fully authoritarian regime at this point, as the election process cannot be considered fraudulent by itself – there is real opposition (and not a pseudo-opposition) in the political spectrum and alternative sources of information are still influential in the country. Although it has become harder for the opponents to contest the government, they still have freedom of association and expression – in contrast with the dynamics in countries like Cuba, Iran, North Korea and China, where missing dissidents are common. There is also relative freedom for foreign media, with vehicles and agencies like Reuters, Bloomberg and Associated Press operating there. These elements indicate that authoritarianism has not yet taken place completely.

It can be concluded, therefore, that 2015 was a key moment of change for *chavismo*, which was already a hybrid in the democratic field and became a hybrid on the authoritarian side. The path followed by the Venezuelan political system seemed to be from a defective democracy to a hybrid regime on the democratic side under Chávez, to a hybrid on the authoritarian side under Maduro. 2015 marked a new stadium for *chavismo*, and that is why I claim that it was a turning point in the transformation process of Venezuela's political system.

No recall referendum

In 2016, another event increased the level of polarization. In October of that year, the electoral body postponed the recall referendum due to allegations of fraud in the collection of signatures necessary for the consultation. The opposition

accused the government of maneuvering to avoid a referendum that year, which could have prevented Maduro from finishing his term. In October of that year, the CNE postponed the vote by arguing that there was fraud in the collection of signatures necessary for holding the referendum¹²⁵.

Chavismo under Maduro put an end to a tool of vertical accountability that was first enshrined in the 1999 Constitution, restricting dissenting opinions and sources of contestation. It could also be said that even the referendum as a tool to legitimize the government's decisions and solve conflicts doesn't seem to work anymore, as pointed out by Andrés Antillano, sociologist at UCV¹²⁶. He recalls that *chavismo* in its initial phase brought elections back to the central stage of the democratic process. Prior to that, the participation dynamics were widely seen as a tool of a kind of bourgeois democracy by the radical left, according to Antillano.

In his view, from 1999 to 2005 there was a democratic explosion in Venezuela, with many experiments with tools of democracy taking place in order to amplify the poor's role in the decision-making process. A second phase of *chavismo* is marked by bureaucratization, where these channels of contestation and popular participation started to be subjugated to the State in exchange for resources –

¹²⁵ In the same week that the CNE announced the postponement of the referendum, former presidential candidate Henrique Capriles said that a court had prohibited his departure from Venezuela along with seven other opponents, including the executive secretary of the opposition coalition MUD, JesúsTorrealba.

¹²⁶ In an interview with the author in Caracas, on June 22nd, 2019.

from food to direct cash transfers. The third period however brought a regression of democracy in the country, with fewer resources, tighter controls and deepening clientelistic practices.

“In this period it can also be observed that, if the people’s will was the central subject and the elections were a tool to put that in practice, the State now appears to be a representative of the people’s will and elections have lost the relevance that they used to have for *chavismo*. The government resumes the rhetoric that elections are part of a bourgeois democracy, and that the voting processes that used to solve the main political conflicts in Venezuela started to be diminished and have become ‘untrustworthy’”, he argues.

The clashes with opposition have strengthened authoritarian characteristics, such as the elimination of sources of contestation and the State apparatus controlled by a small group, i.e. Maduro’s allies and the military – as presented in the following pages.

2017 Constituent Assembly

The alleged fraud in the 2015 legislative elections in the State of Amazonas was not investigated and the presidency of the National Assembly, in opposition hands, decided to reinstate the elected congressmen who had been removed. The government reacted by decreeing that the Supreme Court would assume the responsibilities of the National Assembly.

Officials who opposed it, such as the former attorney general Luisa Ortega, were later removed from office¹²⁷. Protests in the streets were followed by intense repression by security forces.

The bad relationship between government and opposition was, therefore, even more intense in 2016 and 2017, when the government took another step in the direction of authoritarianism. In May of 2017, Maduro called for a new Constituent Assembly as a way to calm the mood on the streets.

Unlike the 1999 Constituent Assembly, however, the 2017 one was not approved by popular referendum. Chávez called for popular consultation to approve a Constituent Assembly. In July 2017, Maduro announced a new Constituent Assembly and called for an election to choose its members, which was marked by complaints of coercion – public officials and beneficiaries of social programs said that they were forced to go to the polls¹²⁸.

In addition, two days after the vote, Smartmatic, the company that processes votes in Venezuelan elections, said that there had been at least 1 million fewer voters at the polls than the 8.1 million claimed by authorities. This indicated that the guarantees of non-fraudulent elections had been suspended. As with 2007

¹²⁷ It is worth remembering that many *Chavistas*, like Gabriel Ramírez, resigned at that time.

¹²⁸For further information see:

<https://valor.globo.com/mundo/noticia/2017/07/31/medo-marca-votacao-para-constituente-na-venezuela.ghtml>

and 2015, it can be said that 2017 was a key moment. Here the fraud involved suppressing the vote on voting day.

The Constituent Assembly was established in August 2017 and since then¹²⁹ it has overlapped functions that had formed part of the scope of the Legislative and Judiciary powers. One of the first acts of the new Assembly was to remove officials who opposed the legislative role of the Supreme Court, like the previously mentioned Ortega.

In the same year, the new Power approved the Law against Hate¹³⁰, which allows the Bolivarian Intelligence Service (Sebin) to arrest activists and media vehicles that promoted “hatred and intolerance” (Andreani, 2018, p. 51)¹³¹. Channels of horizontal accountability and alternation of power, as well as freedom of expression, were closed.

Since then, it should be added, there is no evidence that the Constituent Assembly is working on a new Constitution to replace the 1999 Charter. Its main purpose seems to be to act as a superpower subordinated to the Executive. The

¹²⁹ For further information see:

<https://www.dw.com/pt-br/constituente-aprova-controle-total-dos-poderes-p%C3%BAAblicos-na-venezuela/a-40017396>

¹³⁰ See:

<http://www.vicepresidencia.gob.ve/publicada-en-gaceta-oficial-ley-constitucional-contra-el-odio/>

¹³¹ ADREANI, Fabrice (2018). Above-cited.

episode highlights the erosion of electoral components of the democracy and the acquisition of authoritarian features, as a small group is in control of the institutions, represented by the Constituent Assembly and military.

It can be added that this recrudescence was accompanied by the militarization of the regime. This is the crucial feature of the Maduro government and will dictate the direction of his government both internally and externally.

While the military had carried out activities beyond defense and security under Chávez, for example the Bolívar Plan 2000, under Maduro's administration they took on an even more prominent role (Jácome, 2018)¹³².

“(…) active and retired soldiers received control of the electricity sector, the Caracas metro, aluminum, iron and steel companies in the south of the country, as well as ports and customs. In 2013, four military companies were formed: the National Bolivarian Bank of the Armed Forces (BANFANB), a television channel (TVFANB), EMILTRA for transporting cargo by air, sea and land and the agricultural enterprise AGROFANB. In 2016, in the face of the growing economic crisis, the process of controlling the military sector expanded to strategic areas, such as food and extractive resources”(p. 126).

The author says that, since Chavez's death and the election of Maduro in April

¹³² JÁCOME, Francine (2018). **Los militares en la política y la economía de Venezuela**. Buenos Aires: Nueva Sociedad, n. 274.

2013, the government has sought greater military support in the face of opposition protests and an increasingly deep economic crisis (p.125).

The current government, she argues, is the military. Authors like Giancalone (2005)¹³³ point out that with Maduro, however the military began to play an even more prominent role in the government. The main conclusion is that the increase of the military's political and economic role in recent years has led to a kind of "erosion of democratic control" in Venezuela.

Since 1999, military participation in government activities in Venezuela has been well-known and documented by authors like Castillo (2001)¹³⁴ and Alvarez (2004)¹³⁵. The growing presence of the military in political, social and economic life is also seen as indicative of a non-democratic regime, says Morlino (1986)¹³⁶. The author points out that an essential aspect of democratic order is the subordination of a depoliticized military to a civilian government – the civilian supremacy over the Armed Forces, as presented in the theoretical framework of

¹³³ GIANCALONE, Rita (2005). **The Impact of Neo-populist Civilian-Military Coalitions on Regional Integration and Democracy: The Case of Venezuela**. *Journal of Political and Military Sociology*, n. 1, v. 33.

¹³⁴ CASTILLO, Hernán (2001). **Political and Economic Insecurity: Civil Military Relations in Venezuela**. Washington: Center for International Private Enterprise (Cipe).

¹³⁵ ALVAREZ, Rosangel M. (2004). **La Fuerza Armada Nacional de Venezuela: ¿De actor social a actor político?. Paper para congreso da Latin American Studies Association (Lasa)**.

¹³⁶ MORLINO, Leonardo (1986). **Consolidación democrática. Definición, modelos, hipótesis**. *Revista Española de Investigaciones Sociológicas*, 35, pp. 7-61.

this work. Thus, the interests of the military, he says, should be gradually framed within the channels admitted by the rule of law, when it comes to a democracy, even if it is imperfect.

The suppression of the opposition and conflicts with opponents and *Chavista* dissidents has been a conditional force in strengthening the role of the military side of *chavismo*, which has been supported by closer ties with Cuba. Here, the main democratic feature that was damaged was the civilian supremacy over the Armed Forces, which gained an essential role in the regime.

Linz (1978, p. 318¹³⁷) states that authoritarian regimes pack the cabinet with members of the Armed Forces in order to establish a political shield. He adds that authoritarian regimes are not necessarily ideologically organized and, actually, demobilization and depoliticization can be a way to reduce conflict. This seems to be the case of Maduro's regime, where the level of mobilization is lower than in previous years. The military has a prominent role, but the government is not exclusively controlled by them (Linz, 1975, p. 184¹³⁸).

The expansion of militarism in Venezuela could be seen, therefore, as a way for *chavismo* to use the Armed Forces as an armed branch of authoritarianism, in order to guarantee its permanence in power.

¹³⁷ LINZ, Juan J. (1978). Above-cited.

¹³⁸ LINZ, Juan J. (1975). Above-cited.



Maduro packed his cabinet with members of Armed Forces. In this photo he appears in a military base in Caracas in May, 2019. (Palácio Miraflores/ Reuters)

Re-election in 2018

After the controversial election for the Constituent Assembly in 2017, Venezuela went to the polls again in May 2018. Another series of allegations of irregularity marked the election, for example the opponent coalition MUD were prevented from fielding a candidate, opposition leaders like Henrique Capriles and Leopoldo López – who had been detained in 2017 – were barred from running, and there was a tight deadline for opposition parties to dispute.

Several international entities and countries did not recognize the result of the election, in which Maduro obtained 67.8% of the vote, defeating the dissident *Chavista* Henri Falcón – who gained 21%.

Álvarez states that the lack of recognition of the electoral process and the outcome of the election itself by various actors in the international community reflects the beginning of a crisis, which would change the course of the Maduro government. The opposition also refused to recognize the result of the election and sought to open a new front against Maduro, this time in the constitutional field. He argues therefore:

“With the elections not recognized either by the opposition or by many countries, a crisis of governance in the country began. The opposition declared that Maduro's term was legitimate until January 2019, when he would take office for a new term”.

These clashes with the opposition were a factor in the retrenchment of their rights, which left them with a reduced playing field.

The main authoritarian feature acquired here was the diminution of opponents' ability to run for office and share power, which led to restricted pluralism. As the Executive electoral power's decisions seemed to be designed to support Executive decisions, it could also be said that there is significant lack of horizontal accountability, with only up-down centralized decision-making dynamics being present.

Even so, it wouldn't be appropriate to classify *chavismo* under Maduro as a fully authoritarianism regime. In some way, the regime still permits the existence of an opposition, as well as alternative sources of information. Thus, authoritarian

characteristics coexist with the remaining democratic elements. The real opposition, and activities that are carried out by opponents (freedom of association), as well as the foreign media employees based in Caracas, as previously mentioned, are a few examples that show that the Venezuelan regime is not completely authoritarian yet.

International pressure

In January 2019, the opposition-led Congress declared Maduro a “usurper” and there was a power vacuum in the country, which paved the way for the then National Assembly leader, Juan Guaidó, to be proclaimed president of the country. Many Western countries recognized Guaidó as the legitimate head of State of Venezuela, and the United States¹³⁹ government issued sanctions against the Venezuelan oil sector, which had a strong impact on the country's economy.

In March 2020, the American government indicted Maduro and 14 other officials for drug trafficking and corruption and offered up to US\$ 15 million for information that would lead to his arrest – a clear escalation of international pressure. By May of the same year, an attempt to invade Venezuela by former American-Colombian military members caused controversy, and contradictory

¹³⁹ The process of international pressure was accompanied by deepening ties with countries that are also seen as a threat by the American government, such as Iran. The ties with China were also strengthened at this time. See: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/second-fuel-tanker-from-iran-arrives-in-venezuela-11590447706>

versions of events increased the tension between the parties. *Chavistas* claim that Guaidó was involved in the episode, whose aim was destabilize and overthrow Maduro. Opponents deny this.

In June of 2020, more signals of recrudescence appeared as the government maneuvered to diminish the opposition's means of contestation. On June 13th, the TSJ announced the designation of five new members of the electoral body, CNE. According to the 1999 Constitution this assignment is a Legislative power. With this, *chavismo* under Maduro moved a step forward with the erosion of democracy. The manoeuvre seems to be aimed at strengthening *chavismo* a few months before the legislative elections, scheduled for December 2020.

The opposition sees this as an attack on the Constitution and have decided to boycott the Legislative election. Some opposition politicians have also floated the idea of extending the current Congress term, which is to due to expire in January of 2021. This decision could lead to a similar strategy to that used by the opposition in the Legislative elections in 2005. By that time, *chavismo* was governing without checks and balances, which contributed to the undermining of the democratic elements of the Venezuelan hybrid political system.

Again, it is possible to argue that the dispute between government and opponents is challenging the remaining democratic elements that can still be identified in Venezuela's hybrid regime. By refusing to contest the government via elections, the opposition may be paving the way to bury Venezuela's residual democracy.

Among the political impasses, the country has been in recession since 2014, and last year saw its economy shrink by 35%. Beyond the huge economic crisis, 5.6 million Venezuelans have left the country, according to United Nations figures. Around 4,700 Venezuelans were leaving the country daily before the covid-19 crisis, according to researchers at Simón Bolívar University. Before the coronavirus pandemic, the estimates were that the Venezuelan exodus total would surpass the 6.7 million who have been forced to flee Syria due the civil war that began in 2011, according to the UN Refugee Agency¹⁴⁰. This outflow has been partially reversed¹⁴¹ due to the huge economic crisis that in 2020 has hit the countries that used to be the main destinations for Venezuelans, like Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Brazil. Again, however, this is a necessary but not sufficient condition to lead to alternation of power, as some scholars argue¹⁴².

¹⁴⁰ For further information see: <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/>

¹⁴¹ See:

http://w2.ucab.edu.ve/tl_files/CDH/Lineastematicas/El%20espejismo%20del%20retorno%20FIN.pdf

<https://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/2020/07/21/nota/7914678/medio-pandemia-coronavirus-90-mil-venezolanos-han-dejado-colombia>

¹⁴² One of them is Abraham Lowenthal, emeritus at the University of Southern California, in an interview on democracy in Latin America:

<https://valor.globo.com/mundo/noticia/2019/09/23/transicao-na-venezuela-ja-comecou-diz-lowenthal.ghtml>

At the same time, I found that in contrast to what is claimed about “rentier States” by some authors (Ross, 2001)¹⁴³ – the higher oil revenues, the more authoritarian the government – does not apply to Venezuela. In the face of oil revenues collapse, Maduro has become even more authoritarian in order to legitimize his decisions and suppress the opposition.

Conditional forces, like the collapse of oil prices and clashes with the opposition have fuelled the erosion of the democratic project of *chavismo*. International sanctions have been performing an important role as a supportive force to the erosion the democratic aspects of *chavismo*, as Maduro uses them to justify his government’s undemocratic practices, as a fight against an external enemy.

Lander¹⁴⁴ notes, however, that the authoritarian traces present in Maduro’s government can be seen from the beginning of Chávez’s government, which makes it difficult to say that authoritarian aspects only exist in Maduro’s government. For him, the concentration of power in the hands of a single person, and the idea that a leader must make the final decisions indicate a germ of authoritarianism.

¹⁴³ ROSS, Michael L. (2001). **Does Oil Hinder Democracy?** Cambridge University Press: World Politics, Vol. 53, No. 3, pp. 325-361.

¹⁴⁴ LANDER, Edgardo, emeritus at Central University of Venezuela (UCV), in an interview with the author, on 20th June, 2019, in Caracas.

Chapter 6 – A case of hybridity

Many authors, as discussed above, argue that democracies may have elements of authoritarian regimes or even partial violations of intrinsic features of democracy, yet may still retain democratic features. They are imperfect democracies, marked by the lack of the core elements of a democratic regime. But they can also be classified as hybrid regimes as they have gained authoritarian elements over time. These political systems can combine, for instance, tools of direct democracy, like properly functioning referenda, as well as Electoral and Judiciary powers subjugated to the Executive. These types of political systems are hybrid regimes positioned in the democratic field.

On the other hand, authoritarian governments can be considered partial authoritarian regimes when they maintain some traces of authoritarian political systems, but not all of them. However, once they acquire democratic elements, they can also be classified as hybrid regimes, because they combine elements from both. These political systems, however, would be positioned as hybrid regimes in the authoritarian field. In these types of regime, election results may not be respected, there can be censorship and repression of dissidents, but the opposition and access to alternative information sources are still relevant.

It is important to remember, however, that hybrid regimes are not just a combination of aspects from both sides, as highlighted by Merkel (2004) and Diamond (2002) . They are more than that. These hybrid political systems are the outcome of particular transformation processes in which they lose

characteristics from one side while acquiring elements from the other. Morlino (2009), as mentioned before, remembers that hybrid political systems are products of processes of change that can begin within different types of democracies and authoritarian regimes.

This seems to be exactly what happened in Venezuela over the last 21 years. *Chavismo* ascended to power when Venezuela had a defective democracy, marked by the sharing of power between only two parties. Chávez brought both democratic and authoritarian elements to the political system. In the beginning, the democratic aspects were more visible, but clashes with the opposition caused the non-democratic elements to emerge.

But what caused the erosion of the democratic project of the Bolivarian Revolution? After a comprehensive analysis of the decades of *chavismo*, it could be concluded that the process of erosion of democracy in Venezuela has occurred due the *Chavista* regime's own features, as well as some conditions that made this process possible.

The first one is the nature of *chavismo* itself, including its democratic and non-democratic features (such as the military-civilian coalition that produced *chavismo*, its revolutionary feature with its aim to break with the status quo, and the prioritization of direct democracy over representative democracy, in a process of overlapping institutions). This process wouldn't be possible without the external and internal forces acting upon it at conditional, supportive and intrinsic levels. In regarding to these, at the first level there are several clashes

with the opposition, high oil price and collapse of oil revenues, as well as numerous referenda, deepening ties with Cuba, and international sanctions against the Venezuelan government and economy. The way these variables have interacted has shaped the process of transformation, pushing the regime over the red line, under Chávez's successor.

It is important to remember that the *Chavismo* that emerged under Chávez (1999-2013) was not as a fully-fledged project, but rather an evolving process within the framework of an already enfeebled democracy. However, this evolution could not have occurred in the way it did if there were no triggers, like the coup d'état and the oil revenue peak.

It can be said that the endogenous forces (military-civilian coalition, revolutionary feature and the prioritization of direct democracy instead of a representative one) became stronger through their interaction with contingent forces (oil prices) and clashes with the opposition.

There are many examples of the ways in which government and opposition mutually contributed to the evolution of the regime. If Chávez had not indicated that he would not play under certain democratic rules of the game, the opposition probably would not have attempted a coup d'état against him, which in turn reinforced the authoritarian features of the regime. On the other hand, if the oil prices had not peaked, Chávez possibly would have needed to sit down and negotiate with opponents and business sectors. In 2005, and again more recently, the opposition may not have given up on the democratic game via

elections if opponents had been satisfied that Chávez or Maduro would follow a certain degree of democracy – in the end, both sides decided to act outside the democratic playing field. The clashes with opposition and the increase in oil prices, therefore, were key to the erosion of a defective democracy, which led to the regime's recrudescence.

The hybridity that seems inherent to *chavismo* has appeared at different times since the beginning. In the first years, up to the coup d'état, we can identify democratic elements as well as traces of authoritarianism. The Constituent Assembly and its outcome are indicative of that. On one hand, the new Charter has many elements of direct democracy and participatory tools. On the other, the assembly was composed mostly of *Chavistas*, which compromised the sharing of power with opposition forces.

After 2002, the atmosphere became more polarized and this was clearly reflected in the political system. If the coup was both a reaction and a message by the opposition that operating under democratic rules was difficult, the 2004 recall referendum and the *Tascón* list episode highlighted the authoritarian features that were intrinsic to *chavismo*.

2007 was an important time where aspects from both sides appear strongly again. By holding the referendum to modify the Constitution, Chávez pushed a democratic tool with which the opposition was able to challenge him. By implementing many points of the proposal that was defeated at the polls, he reinforced the authoritarian bias, almost ignoring the popular will.

It is interesting to note that, by combining elements of both democracy and authoritarianism – typical of hybrid regimes – Chávez attempted to advance his 21st-century socialism project by approving the Popular Power law and ending limits for re-election. If the content of the measures highlights the recrudescence of the regime at that time, the way it was implemented was still within the democratic sphere, i.e. the push for a new Constitutional referendum, and the approval by the Legislative power for the public budget and CNE members,.

When it comes to Maduro, the collapse of oil prices, deeper clashes with the opposition, and international sanctions have fortified the intrinsic non-democratic forces, such as a major military influence in the political system and the revolutionary bias.

The advance of authoritarianism after Chávez's death is clear, and the democratic game almost seems to have been played out. After less than one year in power, Maduro's government resorted to harsh repression of demonstrators on the streets. The total number of people arrested and deaths caused by the security forces exploded, in addition to an increase in the number of political prisoners. The government seems to have given up respecting human rights and the rules of democracy.

In 2015, the maneuver backed by the electoral body that prevented the opposition from having a majority in the National Assembly indicated that *chavismo* was not only reinforcing its authoritarian elements, but unequivocally

crossing the red line that separates hybrid regimes with democratic tendencies from hybrid-authoritarian regimes. Since 2015, most legal means for opponents to challenge his administration have been blocked and a small group (the military and Maduro's closest allies) currently controls the State – which did not happen so clearly with Chávez. It means that it is almost impossible to have alternation of power while he is President.

As with 2007, 2015 is an important time for the hardening of the regime too. In that period, it became possible for the international community to say definitively that *chavismo* would not allow the opposition to hold office while Maduro was in power. But, in contrast with 2007, when *chavismo* tried to put authoritarian practices in place, *Chavistas* executed them in 2015, without taking into account the consequences, both inside the country and abroad, like the increasing pressure from the international community that would come in subsequent years.

2017 is also a key moment of hardening of the regime, when Maduro established the Constituent Assembly to overlap with the other powers and allow him to govern not only without checks and balances, but with superpowers. That the international pressure has increased since 2019 is indicative of the high level of authoritarianism in Venezuela nowadays. The nomination of Maduro's allies to the CNE and the TSJ , without the approval of the National Assembly, is another step towards this recrudescence.

However, it is not accurate to consider Venezuela a fully authoritarian regime, as some democratic elements – like real opposition and certain freedoms like access to alternative sources of information – are still allowed. That is why I argue that Venezuela’s hybrid regime shifted from the democratic zone and is currently in the field of authoritarianism. A few characteristics that are quite common in democratic governments still exist in Venezuela. Channels of freedom of association and expression are being squeezed day by day, but they still exist, in contrast to closed regimes like China and Cuba.

Based on the analysis of the last 21 years of *chavismo*, scholars who argue that the regime changed from a democracy to authoritarianism might note that hybridity is inherent to the *Chavista* political system. Even if the regime changed, and left the democratic field for an authoritarian one, it has always been hybrid – the main evidence is that both democratic and authoritarian elements have existed since 1999. The difference is the weight of authoritarian aspects in each phase of *chavismo*. This level was relatively low between 1999 and 2002, and it started to rise after the 2002 coup, and rose even further after Chávez’s death.

With Maduro, the previously slow process of erosion of democracy accelerated, where authoritarian dynamics emerged clearly. The 2015 legislative elections and the 2017 Constituent assembly are evidence of how a hybrid regime performs on the authoritarian side.

Yet features from authoritarian regimes, such as a lack of horizontal accountability, up-down centralized decision-making processes, and fraudulent

elections seem to have grown in recent years. The subsequent episodes of hardening of the regime cited above, indicate an escalation. The collapse of oil prices and international pressure are conditional variables that have been contributing to this recrudescence process.

This timeline based on the review of the *chavismo* years fits well in the landmark work developed by Linz (1975, p. 215), in which he argues that the disillusion of many Latin American countries with democracy and capitalism can be a fertile ground for the rise of authoritarian regimes. However, in the beginning, bureaucratic-military or even oligarchic solutions have no space because the values of democracy have gained ground in recent years. Formulas like plebiscitary democracy and a single mass party, focused on denying individualism, extolling the common good, and positioning themselves against capitalists and entrepreneurs, are more likely. Evidence from Venezuela before and during the *chavismo* years support this claim.

Thus, *chavismo* is, and has always been, a hybrid: it combined democratic and authoritarian characteristics from the start, though the democratic aspects were more salient in the beginning. Instead of a single process of transformation towards authoritarianism, the democratic features of *chavismo* were initially more evident and its authoritarian aspects have only emerged over time. It is not that *chavismo* changed but that it was always a hybrid regime. Over time, the regime shifted from a defective democracy during the PF years to a defective democracy with authoritarian features (a hybrid on the democratic side of the

red line) to a regime that no longer has many elements of a democracy, but is not fully authoritarian either (a hybrid on the authoritarian side of the red line).

Merkel argues, as presented above, that what leads to this hybridity are variables like socioeconomic context, civil society and international factors. Regarding Venezuela, it is clear how these elements have contributed to the transformation process of the *Chavista* hybrid regime.

The intrinsic features of *chavismo* were key to this process but seemed insufficient to lead to this transition. Conditional variables were necessary to make this change possible, while supportive forces have helped it. These variables have resulted in clashes between government and opposition, and the outcome has been the erosion of democracy in Venezuela.

Mallen and García-Guadilla (2017)¹⁴⁵, by examining the conditions under which polarization in Venezuela became pernicious and how it contributed to the erosion of democracy, concluded that:

“(....) the central dimension of polarization began with a political-ideological rift around competing concepts of democracy – participatory and representative, the rights that each vision privileged (individual civil and political rights vs. collective social and economic rights), and the interpretation of participatory democracy as a complement or substitute for representative democracy” (p. 144).

¹⁴⁵ MALLÉN, Ana L.; GARCÍA-GUADILLA, María Pilar (2017). Above-cited.

In the end, *chavismo's* attempt to combine representative and participatory models of democracy, which is clearly expressed in the 1999 Constitution, has failed to deepen democracy in the country, as it set out to do. In contrast, they argue, the result is “a polarized democracy that became increasingly authoritarian.”

Venezuela, therefore, went from a defective democracy during the Punto Fijo decades to a hybrid regime in the democratic field under Chávez to a hybrid in the authoritarian zone under Maduro. Today, Venezuela has the necessary conditions to become an authoritarian regime, but a fully authoritarian regime has not emerged in Venezuela to date. It is not clear, however, if Venezuela is moving towards a closed authoritarian regime and then to totalitarianism or if an unexpected event could lead it back to a weak democracy.

Linz (1964)¹⁴⁶ argues that authoritarian regimes can be unstable hybrids, subject to pressure and drawn in the direction of democracy or totalitarianism (p. 336). They are not necessarily, however, a transition from one to another.

Focused on the typology of authoritarian regimes, Linz says that bureaucratic-military regimes precede what he calls organic statism. As I presented above, in the former, the military has an expanded role in government and are the main actors of a new type of interventionism, which is possible due to a weak State, as

¹⁴⁶ LINZ, Juan J. (1964). Above-cited.

well as failed institutions. In these regimes a coalition predominated by Army officers and bureaucrats control the government, excluding other groups. Organic statism goes beyond the bureaucratic-military authoritarian regime, as it has participation and controlled mobilization via “organic structures”, by rejecting “individualist assumptions of liberal democracy”.

Venezuela’s hybrid political system seems to have aspects of both subtypes of authoritarianism coined by Linz, but has evolved from organic statism under Chávez to a bureaucratic-military authoritarian regime under Maduro, due to the expanding role of the military in the government.

Conclusion

This work is an attempt to analyze the process of evolution of the *Chavista* political system, by assessing the erosion of Venezuelan democracy. In this dissertation, I have tried to understand how the clashes between opposition and government over more than two decades has resulted in the weakening of democratic features, as well as the emergence of authoritarian aspects, in a hybrid regime – that is more than a simple combination of democratic and authoritarian elements: rather it is a defective democracy that loses the core features of a democracy and can no longer be considered as one, while it acquires authoritarian aspects. On the other hand, it can be also an authoritarian system that loses elements of these regimes and retains democratic features.

My analysis on the transformation process of the Venezuelan regime starts in 1958, at the beginning of the so-called Punto Fijo years. The previous decades that cemented the path to Chávez's ascent to power, in contrast to what the literature on Venezuela claims, can be considered an incomplete democracy, that lacks the minimal attributes of a real democracy – like the alternation in power.

Chávez came to power after years of political crisis and social unrest. The 1980s and 1990s were decades of intense crisis, with Venezuelans' increasing dissatisfaction with the bipartisan system that prevailed during the PF period. Chávez not only broke with this *puntofijista* democracy but also inherited it. The duality of the political system that began in 1999 is interesting because of the contradictory elements of both democracy and authoritarianism that made up

chavismo. It is possible to find here both the democratic characteristics and the authoritarian aspects that are intrinsic to *chavismo*, highlighting its hybridity from the beginning. It could be said that while in the first years the democratic features were more evident, in subsequent years clashes with opposition contributed to the recrudescence of the regime.

Although the 1999 Charter has democratic and authoritarian elements, the 1999 Constituent Assembly and the package of enabling laws can be considered authoritarian events at the beginning of the *chavismo* years, which led to intense confrontation with the opposition. On the other hand, 2002 is a period in which the opposition made clear that the game could be played outside of democratic rules.

The 2004 recall referendum episode – which marked the transformation process of the political system from a defective democracy inherited from the *PF* years to a hybrid regime on the democratic side – carries both democratic and authoritarian aspects too. By holding them, Chávez allowed a direct democracy tool to be put into practice. By releasing the names of the 3.2 million that signed the petition for the popular consultation – as well as by firing them from public office – the lack of minimum attributes of horizontal accountability became evident, as well as public coercion by the State.

Due to the authoritarian bias that emerged more strongly during this period, the Venezuelan political system was transformed into a hybrid one.

In subsequent years, strengthened by an opposition boycott of the 2005 legislative election, the record peak in oil prices, and his re-election in 2006, Chávez seemed to feel empowered enough to push the implementation of a new model of political system that contemplated a new Constitution – by proposing the implementation of the 21st century socialism project and the end of term limits.

The project he needed was defeated in a referendum, but Chávez, in practice, decided to move forward with many of the issues, which highlights the authoritarian aspects that emerged in this episode. It is important to highlight, however, that until this point it was possible for the opposition to contest and challenge the government via elections. It means that Venezuela was not a fully authoritarian regime yet, nor was it a defective democracy anymore.

In this second phase, *chavismo* clearly solidified its hybridity but could still be positioned on the democratic side, despite the authoritarian aspects that had appeared by that time. Notwithstanding the non-democratic elements that emerged here, I conclude that the political system created by Chávez still carried democratic and authoritarian aspects at this point, but since the elections were not fraudulent and the results were respected, it was a regime in the democratic field.

The crossing of the red line came with Chávez's successor, Nicolás Maduro, whose government has been characterized by an increasing authoritarianism, censorship and repression, in addition to human rights violations. This

deepening of the authoritarian aspects of the regime came to a new turning point in 2015, when the electoral body did not respect the election results and prevented the opposition from having a supermajority in the Legislative. Since then, it has become clear that election results wouldn't be respected.

Returning to the main hypotheses introduced at the beginning of this work, the purpose here was to figure out which path the *Chavista* regime followed most in the last two decades. The main findings of this work confirm the second hypothesis, that *chavismo* was hybrid from the start. The hypothesis that Venezuela was democratic and became authoritarian seems less suitable to explain the country's process of change during *chavismo*. In contrast, the model proposed at the beginning of this work, that it was a hybrid regime from the start, proves to be more accurate to explain Venezuela's transformation since 1999.

Chavez inherited an imperfect democracy that over time turned into a hybrid regime, since it also acquired elements of an authoritarian regime. These characteristics of authoritarianism have gained increasing prominence over the years, and have contributed to the process of loosening the democratic aspects in the transformation of Venezuela's political system – which went from a hybrid regime in the democratic field during Chávez's years in power to a hybrid regime in the authoritarian field during Maduro's government.

The path that was most followed by Venezuela in the last two decades therefore is confirmed by the second diagram presented in this work:



The findings confirm the hypothesis that *Chavista* Venezuela – rather than turning from democracy to authoritarianism, or even that it had been authoritarian from the start, as some scholars argue – is a case of hybridity from the beginning. The *Chavista* political system has always been hybrid, combining democratic and authoritarian elements that were intrinsic to its DNA from the start, even if I assume *chavismo* was a potpourri of different groups – i.e. former Communists and militaries. The external environment favoured the emergence of authoritarian features, that became more prominent than the democratic ones overtime. But democracy and authoritarianism coexisted in the regime emerged under Chávez, which explains its nature, as well as conflict, not just with the opposition, but also within the formal institutions of liberal democratic regimes, due to its own concept of democracy and rights that must be prioritized according to the idea of direct democracy.

One of the outcomes of the hybridity in the Venezuelan political system is a polarized environment that has been supported by two distinctive narratives that look at the same object in divergent ways. This scenario of crisis and intense polarization serve as an excuse for both government and opposition to justify their points of view and actions, sometimes by non-democratic means.



There are shortages of basic items, due to the lack of oil export dollars to import them. In this photo, a supermarket in Altamira, a wealthy neighbourhood in Caracas. June, 2019 (Marsilea Gombata)

It is worth noting that this process of undermining democracy has no clear destination. International pressure and the worst economic crisis in Venezuelan history are fuelling the authoritarian bias of the regime, instead of making it harder for the government to stay in power in the face of increasing popular demonstrations. It is not yet clear whether Venezuela is moving towards a closed

authoritarian regime, and then to totalitarianism, or if an unexpected event can lead it back to a weak democracy, like the one Chávez inherited from the PF decades. It is important to remember that hybrid regimes are not necessarily part of a transition path to complete democracy or a fully authoritarian regime.

Cameron notes that the most nondemocratic regimes in Latin America “have tended to become Mafia-riven, corrupt, and violent political systems that fall apart under the weight of internal tensions and civil society resistance” (p. 18). “Such democratic resilience should serve as a corrective to excessive pessimism”, he says. That remind us that the fate of the current Venezuelan hybrid political system is everything but certain.

The present work can contribute to the understanding of the evolution of *chavismo* as a political system. For this analysis, I have tried to comprehend the erosion of Venezuelan democracy and how it has been a result of clashes between government and opposition that have been acting as the main cause of the hardening of the regime. The almost opposite ways each part understands the concept of democracy can partially explain both the clashes and the erosion of democracy in Venezuela, as cited above.

I must assume however that the contribution of this work is partial, since developments are happening at a fast pace and, probably, key episodes in the last weeks will not be contemplated here. Nevertheless, the timeline and the analysis provided here can be useful in order to evaluate even the upcoming events within the transformation process of Venezuelan political system.

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