

Venezuela and Its Labyrinth: Institutional Change and Authoritarianism in Twenty-first-Century Socialism¹

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Since 1999 Venezuela has experienced a very intense process of institutional transformation that has favored the capacity of the executive branch and its allies to undermine democracy by democratic means. Political confrontation has produced important changes in the distribution of political power among relevant actors, increasing the control of Chavismo over the political system by eroding normative restrictions on power accumulation, reducing civil liberties, and imposing strict control over mass media and political freedoms. Endogenous institutional change has produced a variation on equilibrium that furthers the interests of Chavismo and its allies while excluding important sectors of the population and imposing authoritarianism and political persecution as a mechanism of political control in a double-edged process through which power accumulation allows institutional change, which in turn allows increased political control.

Keywords: Venezuela, democracy, institutions, power distribution, bargaining, authoritarianism, Chavismo

Desde 1999, Venezuela ha experimentado un intenso proceso de transformación institucional que ha favorecido la capacidad del Ejecutivo, y sus aliados, para erosionar la democracia mediante mecanismos democráticos. La confrontación política ha producido cambios importantes en la distribución del poder político entre los actores relevantes. Esto ha incrementado el poder del chavismo sobre el sistema político y ha facilitado la reducción de las restricciones normativas a la acumulación del poder. En los últimos años los venezolanos han experimentado una importante reducción de las libertades civiles, controles estrictos sobre los medios de comunicación y la merma de sus libertades políticas. En Venezuela el cambio institucional tiene un carácter endógeno. Se han producido variaciones de equilibrio que favorecen los intereses del chavismo y sus aliados y que, al mismo tiempo, han auspiciado la exclusión de amplios sectores de la población. Lo anterior ha traído como consecuencia la imposición del autoritarismo y la persecución política como mecanismos de control político

¹ This article was written with the support of Bamber University during a postdoctoral stay at the Graduate School of Social Sciences.

en un proceso continuo en el cual la acumulación de poder favorece el cambio institucional, el cual a su vez auspicia el incremento del control político.

Keywords: Venezuela, democracia, instituciones, distribución del poder, negociaciones políticas, autoritarismo, chavismo

“Muchos hombres están en este hombre. Muchas vidas están en esta vida. Ha tenido muchos nombres. Ha tenido muchas vidas. Todos esos nombres y todas esas vidas no podrían caber en tu pobre cabeza. No podrían caber en mi pobre cabeza”.

–Arturo Uslar Pietri. “La fuga de Miranda”

“‘Damn it,’ he sighed. ‘How will I ever get out of this labyrinth?’”

–Gabriel García Márquez. *The General in His Labyrinth*

Introduction

During the last twenty years Venezuela has faced a process of endogenous institutional transformation that has profoundly altered the very nature of its political system. This process represents a complex variation in the quality and dynamics of liberal democracy, as a new model of political organization has been implemented and developed under the 1999 constitution. Indeed, we can talk about a process of political transformation that implies a change in the trajectory of institutional evolution, with a radical alteration of the normative, ideological, and organizational structure of the country. After Hugo Chávez was elected president in December 1998, deep changes in incentive systems, governmental mechanisms, bureaucratic organization, and legislation impacted the exercise and distribution of political power as well as the population’s associated dynamics and patterns of behavior.

Chávez took advantage of institutional fragility to advance a process of political transformation that, instead of strengthening the functionality of representative democracy, which had been in place since 1958, promoted its demise and substitution. Chávez used his popularity to undermine the old structures of political arrangements and alliances, and after forty years traditional political parties yielded power to new politically-preferred actors enjoying popular support. A substitution of the traditional political class ensued, as did an operational redefinition of the political system. Electoral processes were regularly used to alter the characteristics of democratic institutions and support important structural transformations. All of this shaped an authoritarian turn that responded to changes in the distribution of power among relevant actors in Venezuelan politics.

We will argue that the effect of power distribution in Venezuelan institutional transformation is cumulative. A causal relationship between power concentration and institutional change can be

found by studying the history of political development during the last twenty years. Chavismo² has been able to concentrate political power and control the population by using force, persuasion, and new legislation, while a parallel process of institutional conformity supports the permanent alteration of equilibria. Institutional variability is the result of complex interactions among players with the capacity to influence power distribution according to their bargaining capabilities. In the context of Venezuelan politics Chavismo has increased political control over resources and decision making, and incumbents have used their share of political power to modify the institutional framework according to their own particular interests. They have increased their control over public decision making and legitimized their actions by introducing changes in the legal system and limiting both the independence of the different branches of government and the actions of the opposition, in particular after the dubious election of Nicolás Maduro in 2013.

A characteristic of the Venezuelan political system is its pronounced asymmetries in the distribution and management of political power, which have favored the imposition of political control over the population, the mass media, and public opinion. Both the use of the military as a regulatory device and hegemonic control by the government bolstered the imposition of authoritarianism, not as a result of a revolutionary struggle or a coup d'état, but as a consequence of the process of institutional transformation derived from changes in power distribution and in democratic mechanisms. Accumulation of power by Chavismo shaped the institutional framework and its outcomes. It is important to note that alterations in power allocation fostered significant changes in the country's institutional structure. Those changes responded to demands associated with power relations among self-interested players acting individually or as members of a political coalition. In this context we will argue that significant changes in force correlations have become a source of endogenous institutional change in Venezuelan politics.

In this article we will study the process of institutional development and change through the lens of contemporary political developments in Venezuela. We will argue that the country is in a process of institutional change that responds to the increasing accumulation of power by the executive and the political coalition that supports Maduro as president. This results from a lengthy process of eroding normative restrictions on power accumulation. Chavismo has used democratic mechanisms to undermine democracy by reducing civil liberties and monopolizing political power. This has implied a process of the exclusion of important social sectors, the reduction of countrywide productive capabilities, and the imposition of populism as a tool for gaining the popular support that the "revolutionary process" needs to legitimize political action. As result of that, power has been distributed asymmetrically granting Chavismo increasing political control.

All of this was the result of an interlocking political operation that allowed the Venezuelan government to accumulate power through the transformation of the institutional framework and to impose authoritarianism. This has resulted in changes in the institutional framework and the substitution of a traditional bourgeois type of democracy by a revolutionary regime. Chavismo

² We refer to Chavismo as the heterogeneous political and popular movements and organizations that converged around the ideas and leadership of President Hugo Chávez.

developed the ability to build a winning coalition that has allowed the accumulation of control and influence over the political process and has increasingly introduced changes into the rules of the game to its own advantage. In this paper, I will build upon Jack Knight's (1992) argument about institutions' distributive effects in order to derive theoretical conclusions based on evidence from the Venezuelan case. We use the image of labyrinth as a metaphor for political complexity; labyrinths are convoluted, and we tend to get lost in them when we are unable to read their signs. In this article we will describe the intricacies of the Venezuelan political situation, the difficulties of granting democratic governance, and the transition to authoritarianism and violence.

From Institutional Decay to an Asymmetric Accumulation of Power

A Revolutionary Utopia

In *Utopia Unarmed: The Latin American Left After the Cold War* (1994) Mexican intellectual and former minister of Foreign Affairs Jorge G. Castañeda minutely examines the situation of the Latin American left after the decay and disappearance of the Soviet Union, which led to the so-called End of History, cosmopolitan democracy, and the hegemonic dominance of the United States in world politics. The collapse of the Soviet Union reduced political and economic support for leftist movements and parties and put an end to leftist ideological influence and propaganda in the Americas, or so it seemed. The utopia was not only disarmed, but also vanishing, at least for a while, as it became apparent that revolutionary struggle to overthrow governments and seize power was no longer a feasible option. During the 1990s the region saw the termination of military dictatorships, such as Pinochet's in Chile, the end of the guerrilla movement in Peru, and the beginning of negotiations with the Colombian guerrillas. One thing became clear: the route to power was through elections, and representative democracy was considered the only viable form of political organization. Throughout the 90s the left occupied a marginal position in regional politics, while representative democracy faced a very important crisis of legitimacy due to its inability to address important social and economic problems: inequality in the distribution of income, poverty, debt, inflation, and lack of confidence in the political classes. Generalized resentment among populations opened the gates to new political alternatives.

Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) argue that current democracies can become victims of dangerous enemies that develop from within. The demise of democracy in our time is not due to military revolts or revolutionary struggle in traditional terms, but to its own structural weaknesses. Indeed, one would expect the institutional framework to provide conditions of stability in the long run, however, when facing unfair outcomes or uneven distribution of resources, people find reasons to deviate from patterns of behavior associated with the institutional design (Greif and Laitin 2004). This will produce instability in the political system and may create conditions favorable for its replacement when the institutional setting is incapable of reinforcing its internal dynamics and processes (Latouche 2019).

Under those conditions, populist outsiders can win popularity and take power by employing charisma and efficient organization to win the dissatisfied popular masses and defeat traditional political parties in relatively fair electoral processes (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

We can find such a pattern in the recent historical development of Latin America. Weak representative democratic regimes gave way to left wing political organizations that won elections and, in many cases, started a transformation process based on the accumulation of power, mass media control, and ideological dominance that, through popular support, enhanced the executive branch as the central axis of government. But, even more importantly, the leftists commenced a process of radical institutional modification that attempted to redefine patterns of association, incentive systems, bureaucratic procedures, and control mechanisms, which had profound distributional implications. A wave of institutional change occurred throughout the region (Weylan 2008). Hugo Chávez represented the return of a revolutionary populist utopia to Latin American politics.³ Elections, not military struggle, had become the route to power, given certain objective conditions. Several authors have recognized that, in the case of Venezuela, the fragility of the institutional arrangement and legitimacy crisis weakened the democratic system to its breaking point (Coker 2001; Levine 2002; Rey 1989; Urbaneja 1992). A wrongly disadvantaged population stopped supporting the system, were unrepresented, and, in fact, were excluded from the governmental benefits system. By the end of the 1990s the system had lost its legitimacy due to the collapse of the party system in place since 1958 (Roberts 2003).

Between 1988 and 1998 Venezuela underwent a complex process of political confrontation that eroded the foundations of representative democracy and affected social equilibria. Instability ensued after a social uprising in February 1988, attempted coups in 1992, and the impeachment of President Carlos Andrés Pérez in 1993. Political parties lost their ability to mobilize supporters and represent the interests of important sectors of the population that believed that the system had failed.⁴ People demanded changes, as the political system was unable to produce the ideological, economic, and political fundamentals required to generate political support and shore up democracy. People discounted traditional political parties, elected officials were challenged, and there was a general sense of disbelief in the ability of the political class to undertake the necessary steps to transform the political system, incorporate the excluded into the productive process, reduce poverty, fight corruption, and allay uncertainty.

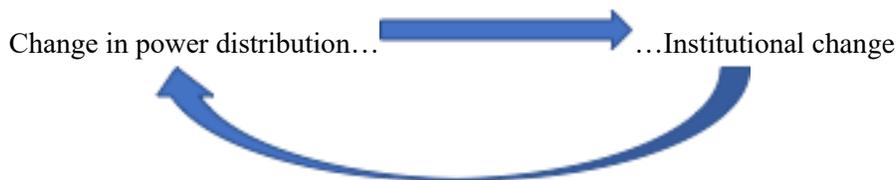
³ According to one author, “With the rise of Chávez at the end of the 1990s, moreover, it became clear that even more traditional statist and nationalist variants of populism retained a capacity to mobilize mass support where established party systems had been undermined by acute political and economic crises and deepening social inequalities” (Roberts 2003, 36).

⁴ “By 1989, dramatic increases in inequality, poverty, repression, and violence—together with the failure of the traditional corporatist elite pact-making (called the *Punto Fijo* system) to represent the public interest or include the majority of the population in any political participation other than voting—demonstrated the failure of liberal democracy in Venezuela” (Coker 2014, 88).

Political power started to build around a charismatic outsider who presented himself as an alternative to corruption, exclusion, and poverty (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Chávez, leading a coalition of small parties known as the *Polo Patriótico*, managed to successfully confront the forces of traditional politics represented in the two major parties, Acción Democrática and the Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente (COPEI). He was able to build hope and support by using nationalistic rhetoric that recognized the needs of the poor while promising change and prosperity. In an amazingly fast political campaign based on populist discourse, leftist ideology, and massive popular mobilizations, Chávez obtained, according to official 1998 results, 56.20% of the votes. For the first time in the political history of the country a military man obtained power through election, and it was also the first time for the left. Chávez won in the context of continuous political confrontation and weak institutional structure in which political actors tried to increase their strategic advantages and accessibility to power resources in open political conflict.

Chávez's assumption of the presidency in 1999 entailed an important variation in the distribution of power and resources in the Venezuelan political system that had an important impact on the structure of the institutional framework. Indeed one can say that from that point on, the path of institutional development in Venezuela underwent a significant turn as the nature of social interactions redefined the terms of political equilibrium. After the new constitution was promulgated in 1999 and Chávez "relegitimized" his power in a new presidential election in 2000—in which he received over 60% of the votes—substantial changes in incentives mechanisms and social arrangements were introduced. New forms of clientelism were in place in which the poor became the axis of political discourse and social programs, alongside a reduction in the influence of the middle class, the Church, the financial sector, and the traditional political class. The bureaucracy was intervened as the executive branch advanced in the accumulation of power and political control. A new process was in place by virtue of which power accumulation favored institutional change, and institutional change favored, in turn, further power accumulation in a continuous process. Accordingly, as Chavismo become more powerful and capable of controlling the political process, it was able to advance changes in the institutional framework, and those changes propped up increases in political control (see Figure 1).

Figure 1



It is broadly accepted that institutions entail structural parameters providing normative patterns that shape human behavior and define the scope of our interactions with others and the outcomes of social exchange. Institutions reduce uncertainty and determine the characteristics of social order (North 1990). One would then expect institutions to have permanence in the long run; people learn to live their lives according to incentives and patterns of acceptable behavior that are provided and structure social interactions. A process of institutional change produces a distortion in those patterns and their substitution by new ones. When institutions stop producing social revenues, certain behaviors are discouraged, and different patterns appear. Each institutional framework generates the conditions for its own reproduction and maintenance (Greif and Laitin 2004). Institutional change requires social behavior and processes to be reinforced in their internal dynamics by producing proper incentives for those who support the emerging equilibrium. When institutional change results from variations in the distribution of power, strategic actors will accept those changes for the maximization of their own interests, as the distribution of costs and benefits will be oriented to the reinforcement of the new institutional structure. In other words: “the conflict over the substantive benefits of social life extends to the development of the institutional arrangements that structure it” (Knight 1992, 123).

During the period under study, institutional change in Venezuela was characterized by continual democratic institutional decline and its progressive substitution by authoritarianism. Since the beginning of the “Revolution” Chavismo developed the ability to monopolize public space. Some of the tools used to assure hegemony and control were permanent mobilization and public acts and discourses, as well as direct subsidies, political organization, control of mass media, and police and military action. The government dominated the vision of public goods as well as organizational and financial capabilities, while opposition parties saw their influence diminished and veto power reduced. Despite economic crisis, constant opposition, and an adversarial international context, Chavismo was granted political control over the country for two decades. Political power was centralized by a political coalition of the executive, the military forces, and the upper echelon leadership of the ruling party—the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV).

As we will see below, this process has been gradual, without an abrupt rupture in the rule of law, in contrast, for example, to President Fujimori’s 1992 takeover of the Peruvian Congress, or a ruthless imposition of the military in the government. Instead, in a process of “learning by doing,” Chavismo moved to steadily undermine bourgeois democratic values and institutions. However, we observe that the rule of law has suffered multiple fissures: a) evident bias in the legal interpretation of norms; b) application of judicial mechanisms against political competitors; c) use of repression against public demonstrations; d) attacks on the free press and speech; e) destruction mechanisms for checks and balances; f) lessened division of powers; g) absence of transparency in electoral processes; e) redefinition of property rights; f) control by the military. No clear imposition of a traditional authoritarian regime has occurred, and yet an authoritarian structure of government has developed over the years.

Chavismo moves in a gray area by using the mechanisms of democracy to weaken the effectiveness of liberal democratic institutions while strengthening its own political apparatus. Changes in the distribution of power among relevant political actors has produced a process of progressive endogenous institutional change. After twenty years in power, Chavismo has imposed a form of *continuismo*⁵ that first was based on Chávez's charisma, anti-imperialist discourse, and caudillo-style personalism (Weyland 2001). Over the years it has evolved toward control of political offices under President Nicolás Maduro, in power since 2013. One could say that the fundamental aim of institutional change during the last twenty years has been to increase political control and to remain in power to build the Bolivarian Revolution.⁶ Thus, the government's continuity can be explained by the construction of coalitions, use of subsidies, incentives, and ideological and organizational control, on the one hand, and the use of police and military forces against the opposition and the construction of international strategic alliances, on the other. These means have been used to strength the system, incorporate institutional changes, and guarantee its reproduction in the long run.

Increasing Political Control

Chávez's death from cancer in 2013 triggered significant turmoil in contemporary Venezuelan politics. During his fourteen years in the presidency, he managed to centralize political power and advance the transformation of Venezuelan democracy (Coker 2014). He was a charismatic leader who used his personal sway to control the military and mobilize popular masses (Kestler 2009; Latouche 2019). He took advantage of institutional weaknesses to impose his personalistic vision regarding Venezuelan politics. As decay of the party system affected the mechanisms of political representation, Chávez substituted every form of party-based intermediation with a direct relationship between himself and the popular masses (Roberts 2003), which facilitated control over the partisan political coalition that supported his government. Elevated levels of popular support and continuous electoral success allowed his unchallenged control over the administration. Chávez evoked the classic figure of the traditional political caudillo, as a nationalistic strongman who centralized decision making and resource management according to his own vision and through extensive control mechanisms.

Chávez gained the presidency by promising major changes in the political system, including a new constitution designed, according to the official discourse, to *incarnate* the "original will" of the

⁵ In 1956 professor Merle Kling introduced the idea of *continuismo* in the study of Latin American politics as a "prolonged office holding by a strong caudillo [who] in essence represents the reverse side of the shield of political instability. Continuismo signifies not the absence of political instability but the effective suppression of potential and incipient rebellions by competent caudillos. Continuismo, in fact, may be regarded as perpetuation in office by means of a series of successful anticipatory revolts" (Kling 1956, 24).

⁶ Ideologically, Chavismo is based on a series of political doctrines among which the political thinking of Simón Bolívar occupies a very important place. Bolívar has been utilized by the revolution as a driving force; in particular, his vision regarding Latin American integration and anti-imperialism has been reinterpreted to fit the revolutionary creed. Since the beginning of the revolution the image of Bolívar has been incorporated into the aesthetic of Chavismo and his thought as an integral component of the political discourse. Chávez defined the "Bolivarian" nature of his movement at least as early as the 1998 political campaign.

people.⁷ That was the beginning of a radical transformation of the institutional setting that progressively buttressed the establishment of participatory democracy based on permanent mass mobilization, the organization of popular movements, control over resources, and institutional accommodation for the fulfillment of the political, social, and economic aims of the revolution. The new constitution had a significant impact on the nature and dynamics of the country. It was widely used as a justification for government actions and as the foundation for the organization of the state and bureaucracy that allowed the centralization of power in the national government and significant increases in its political control.⁸ It also legalized military intervention in civil affairs, centralization of resources, and enhancement of the figure of the president as the pivotal force in the political game, which reduced the weight of checks and balances and weakened the effectiveness of the division of power. The system evolved toward the monopolization of power by the executive and its legitimation by electoral results.

Chávez enjoyed high levels of popular support and legitimacy throughout his mandate. During the first few years, political change assumed a reformist pace. The institutional framework of representative democracy was still in place and functioning while its beneficiaries resisted the proposed transformation. The system was rapidly polarized, old structures were dismantled at the beginning of the revolutionary process, though the government did not have the experience or the will to structurally replace them in an orderly and coherent fashion, and political personalism and improvisation took over. The government's first two years were very conflictive, full of confrontations with the media, traditional parties, universities, and even the Catholic Church. A clear substitution of the political clientele was underway. While representative democracy openly favored the middle and upper classes and private investment, in contrast, the Bolivarian Revolution favored the poorer sectors of society, public investment, and social programs.

Chávez advanced the recognition of the poorer social sectors as active players in the political game. Participatory democracy was nurtured by the activity of the “new political subject” through mass mobilization, assemblies, and grassroots movements such as the *Círculos Bolivarianos*,⁹ *Comités de*

⁷ “From the beginning, Chávez centered his political agenda around the call for fundamental reform of the country's political institutions, to be achieved by a Constituent Assembly that would write a new Constitution” (Levine 2002, 265).

⁸ “The 1999 Constitution instituted a wide range of changes: some entail a basic restructuring of institutions; others continue and reinforce previous trends. The country was renamed the ‘Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela’ and the pattern of national institutions was overhauled: a unicameral National Assembly replaced the old two-chamber Congress and the office of Vice President was created, along with a council of state and a ‘moral power,’ one of the key elements of Simon Bolivar's constitutional thought. Provision is made for one-time re-election of the President, whose term is lengthened to six years. At the most general level the Constitution contains provisions that enhance citizen rights and human rights generally, along with articles that reinforce the power and autonomy of the central government, the national executive, and the security forces” (Levine 2002, 265).

⁹ The *Círculos Bolivarianos*, later called collectives (*colectivos*), can be defined as highly ideological, popular organizations that support and are financed by the government. They can have a civil character and present themselves as part of a cultural movement, or they can have a paramilitary character. The latter use violence to defend the “revolution.”

Base, and Community Councils.¹⁰ On the other hand, financial and industrial sectors, traditional parties, and the armed forces actively colluded against the government as they resisted the dimensions of political change intended by Chavismo and its allies. In fact, confrontation between the government and the opposition rose in crescendo over 2000 and 2001 in the context of important changes in the distribution of resources, alterations in the dynamics of privilege, and important demonstrations on both sides of the political divide. This reflected class struggle and polarization within Venezuelan society. In the distribution of benefits winners and losers were clearly defined, and large majorities that had been left behind during the last decades of representative democracy became the fundamental base of support for Chavismo and the targeted groups for social programs and governmental actions, since they represented a very large percentage of the population. Chávez became an expression of anger at the injustice that for many years characterized social relations in Venezuela, and as such he contributed to increased divisiveness while simultaneously reducing institutional autonomy and coopting the judiciary.

Tensions between the government and the opposition grew steadily during the first two years under Chávez, with frequent demonstrations and protests against the government, and the situation reached its peak in 2002. On April 11, after a long strike led by both the Federation of Economic Chambers (FEDECAMARAS) and the Confederation of Unions, with behind-the-scenes participation by traditional political parties, detailed coverage by the mass media, and a very complex conflict in the Venezuelan Oil Company (PDVSA), the military high command asked Chávez to step down from the presidency. He was detained in a military facility until liberated, amid a massive popular protest, by Air Force General Raúl Isaías Baduel and restored to the presidency on April 13. The attempted coup was used to validate power accumulation, administrative centralization, and political persecution and ended up accelerating the revolutionary process. The opposition was unable to keep its coherence once Chávez returned to power; many of their leaders were persecuted and faced judicial proceedings while others went into exile. The opposition was diminished to the point that it could not significantly counter the process of political transformation advanced by Chavismo. Chávez's discourse became more aggressive against his domestic and external opponents, as he declared himself a socialist and sped up the destruction of the remaining institutions of representative democracy.¹¹ This was a break-out point in the advancement of authoritarianism in Venezuela, as the government became progressively despotic, less transparent, and increasingly dependent on the charismatic figure of Chávez.

We cannot identify any coherent plan of institutional enhancement or clear political goals at that time, as twenty-first-century socialism was, according to Chávez himself, a “work in progress.” After the failed coup social expenditure increased in both social programs and political intelligence

¹⁰ We are referring here to grassroots, local committees that are organized in neighborhoods as part of the revolutionary movement.

¹¹ “At this stage the Bolivarian hegemony began to materialize. With the dichotomous terrain fully unveiled, Chávez's populist project shifted from a discourse promising to end an institutional system that benefited only the minority and improve the lives of Venezuela's less privileged population to a radical, democratically elected underdog configuration against the elitists and repressive groups that were attempting to restore their neoliberal hegemonic apparatus” (Brading 2014, 59).

and security. We must remember that according to Ceresole (1999) the three building blocks of the Bolivarian Revolution were defined around the linkage between the caudillo, the people, and the armed forces. This thesis acquired importance as the ideological support of the revolutionary process and was assumed as a justification for the concentration of power in the figure of Chávez. He was, according to this argument, acting as a caudillo on behalf of the people and in accordance with his mandate; by attacking the old structures he was supposed to bring about social justice and reduce inequality and poverty. In a way, the government used popular resentment to implement institutional changes that negatively affected the interests of the middle class while assuring the concentration of undisputed power in the government, and especially, the presidency.

Hugo Chávez dominated the historical process, and power was increasingly centralized as he became the focal point of decision making and resource distribution. Increases in oil revenues allowed the government to augment expenditures on social programs and direct subsidies to the poor and favor the interests of Chávez's political group and the armed forces. Along with this process came a militarization of national life as the military emerged from their barracks to take an active part in civilian affairs.

Chávez built a hybrid regime which kept elections as a fundamental element of democracy. This fact played a crucial role in legitimizing the political regime, as Venezuela could not be accused of being a dictatorship in traditional terms. Despite the regime's authoritarian nature, Chávez was careful in granting electoral legitimacy to the exercise of power. In fact, he participated in numerous electoral processes during his mandate, including a recall referendum proposed by the opposition in 2004, in which he obtained the majority of votes. Chávez was elected again in 2006 and reelected in 2012 a few months before his death.

Chávez instituted a system of electoral authoritarianism. Elections were relatively free, but with barriers to entry that implied disadvantages for the opposition, unequal competitive conditions, and strong polarization between the lower and the upper classes. Control of mass communication and populist measures allowed Chávez to carry out his mandate with elevated levels of political support and acceptance (Martin 2017). There is no evidence of autonomous institutional innovations, but certainly a process was ongoing to abolish the previous institutional framework.

The Chávez government was characterized by political personalism based on charisma and mass mobilization as hegemonic mechanisms for social control. He praised direct participation rather than traditional political representation, which consequently became inoperative and unnecessary as a mediating mechanism between the people and the administration. Chávez turned out to be the sole valid interlocutor. As such, he coopted political action and imposed incipient institutional mechanisms that complemented his influence and authority, with him at the top and few secondary leaders who directly depended on his approval and validation. Below the level of the president, no one had real political control, just restricted capacities and influence (Ellner 2010).

Indeed, as structures of checks and balances were restrained, the executive branch gained a monopoly over decision making and resources administration through centralized processes of

institutional adjustments grounded in Chávez's leadership (Weylan 2001; Shifter 2006). All of this granted high levels of maneuverability to the executive branch and favored hegemonic control of the public sphere. Chávez moved rapidly to control civil society and the mass media. In 2007 Radio Caracas Television, one of the most important television networks critical of the government, lost its broadcast license; several other television and radio stations were pressured through legal means or tax measures, and, in addition, there was a significant reduction in opinion-related programs due to censorship or self-censorship (Centeno and Mata 2017), persecution of journalists, and heavy fines to newspapers such as *Tal Cual*, and to opposition TV stations such as Globovisión. The government increased control of the public sphere and imposed a communicational hegemony (Bisbal 2009). Political pressure was applied against both public universities and the Catholic Church, and the former suffered a reduction in their budgets and autonomy, while the latter was publicly labeled an enemy of the revolution. Strong controls were imposed on the private university and financial sectors. Regulations on foreign exchange accessibility forced serious limitations on the acquisition of imported goods and on foreign investments. Restrictions were placed on obtaining passports along with increases in bureaucratic control of private activities. The accumulation of political power by Chavismo was accompanied by an intensification in social control, increments in the number and diversity of social programs for the poor, and changes in bureaucratic criteria and processes.

Institutional Change as a Rupture

Decision makers maximize their interests within the context of contemporaneous institutional constraints (Knight 1992; North 1990; North et al. 2009). Institutions define the opportunities available to players as a function of relative costs (North 1990; Knight 1992), determine the shape of social interactions, and reduce transaction costs (Barragán 1999). However, weak institutional frameworks are likely to be colonized by an outsider whenever they lose their ability to reproduce a given equilibrium (Latouche 2008). The accumulation of power and resources in a political group or actor might breach the stability of the institutional setting by increasing the influence of that group, or person, in the decision-making process and their access to resources. Each institutional setting creates a particular equilibrium with its own distribution of costs and benefits and will determine patterns of behavior, values, and cultural dynamics, including its own aesthetic (Latouche 2019). Even more, individuals learn how to live according to the institutional codes in their societies.¹² Social behavior responds to socialization processes that tell people which behaviors guarantee individual benefits and foster social cooperation. Whenever an institutionalized behavior starts producing unfair results, people will stop following it and will attempt to maximize their benefits by substituting more suitable one, even if they do not respond to the institutional framework in place or are openly acting against it (Coase 1960; Brennan and Buchanan 1985;

¹² According to Knight, "New generations learn existing rules and norms by means of imitation and reinforcement" (1992, 88).

Schelling 1960). This too will provoke institutional change by affecting the equilibrium of the institutional set.

People develop common knowledge about the causes and consequences of their behavior and try to adjust to institutional requirements with the expectation to benefit from it. Institutions coordinate behavior and tend to facilitate cooperation among players' best response strategies. But if the efficiency of the coordinating dynamic breaks, affecting the interests of the majority of the population, the system will tend toward disequilibrium and disruption, which will increase uncertainty by distorting the incentive system. The stability of an institutional framework depends on its ability to foster proper distributive criteria, its efficiency in the implementation of a distributive mechanism, and its ability to enforce rules (Vanberg 1999; Zintl 1999). The absence of such ability weakens support and tends to reduce the legitimacy of the institutional framework; tensions will throw the system out of equilibrium and foster endogenous institutional change (Greif and Laitin 2004). In the case of Venezuela's contemporary transition, institutional change came as a rupture. Long-term institutional inefficiency overwhelmed the capacity of institutional mechanisms to maintain equilibrium and control and exhausted the so-called populist system of elite conciliation that supported representative democracy in Venezuela (Rey 1989). At some point the elites were unable to sustain the system, and a coalition of emergent actors, many of them from the popular sectors, organized against it.

The demand size of social interaction overflowed as institutional control mechanisms were decimated. Hegemonic groups were unable to sustain the institutional structure as the majority of players received negative results, and *Puntofijismo* was disparaged as a collective project. In this context, Hugo Chávez attempted to control political and social space with no other limits than those imposed by power relations among relevant actors and by the availability of resources. Once the institutional framework of *Puntofijismo* was destroyed, there was no planned attempt to further transform the institutional framework to consolidate the power of Chavismo. Indeed, it was unnecessary, because at that point Chávez had become a "superplayer" with the monopolistic capability to make decisions and use resources without layers of external control, which allowed him to survive in the presidency for thirteen years.¹³ Despite changes in legislation and administrative organization, Chávez imposed a personalist exercise of power and commenced a transformation by decimation of the institutional setting he had inherited and its substitution by political personalism. Chávez reinterpreted the contents of the institutional setting according to his needs and interests; he manipulated them and imposed his personal power and charisma. Its gradual replacement was possible only when Chávez's death produced a new distribution of power that required a new institutional framework that reflected the political context and the capabilities of newly empowered relevant actors within the institutional dynamics they were facing (Mahoney and Thelen 2009).

¹³ Bueno de Mesquita et al. observe that: "Long tenure is not necessarily the hallmark of a government that promotes social welfare, but it is the hallmark of a politically successful leader" (2003, 273).

Institutional Development under Authoritarianism

The Demise of Democracy

According to Gandhi and Przeworski (2007) there is a positive correlation between institutional development and the survival of authoritarian regimes. The success or failure of the institutional framework in guaranteeing a stable equilibrium will define the durability of the political regime. In a statistical data series, they showed the impact of institutions on the survivability of political regimes. Authoritarianism cannot be explained uniquely on the basis of the crude exercise of power; instead, the stability of regimes depends on agreements among relevant actors. Coalitions play a fundamental role in the definition of political stability when they support the evolution and functioning of institutions. Clearly, coalitions require concessions and consensus regarding the distribution of resources and influence. The members of the coalition will shape the institutional set according to their interests and will intentionally try to improve their positions within the frame on which they agree, in accordance with how they will benefit from it.¹⁴ According to the study, rulers who institutionalize sufficiently are able to exercise power for larger periods than those who do not (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007, 1290). The determination of the degree of institutionalization required to survive depends on the evaluation of the situation, resource availability, political support, and the characteristics of the opposition, as power becomes the driving force behind institutional change and design.

Power holders will determine the extent of concessions they are willing to bestow according to their own capacities and the scope of the situation. For instance, in a situation of strong support and weak opposition, and surplus in resource availability, low levels of institutionalization will suffice to warrant regime survival. Inversely, high levels of institutionalization will be needed when resources are scarce, the opposition strong, and popular support doubtful. An agreement among relevant actors will always be necessary to establish governance, but the nature and extent of such agreements will depend on the characteristics of the context.¹⁵ Only after arrangements are defined will incentive mechanisms be determined, as they become a requirement for strengthening support from the population, organized groups, and organizations. In some cases, they will be needed in order to provide resources (taxes, investments, productive labor); in others, they will be required for political support (favorable public opinion, party membership, grassroots organization affiliation, political mobilization, and so on). The logic of redistribution of resources and goods will be defined at this point as well. Every political regime requires its support levels to be high enough to guarantee institutional balance and long-term functioning. The rules of the game do not operate in a vacuum, but are defined by power distribution. In historical terms, they will be affected in their nature and

¹⁴ Mahoney and Thelen explain: "In some cases, the power of one group (or coalition) relative to another may be so great that dominant actors are able to design institutions that closely correspond to their well-defined institutional preferences" (2009, 8).

¹⁵ In a democracy negotiation to define the scope of the institutional setting tends to be very complex and requires ample participation of diverse sectors and the presence of free public opinion. Authoritarian regimes also face a complex process to reach agreements, however, they tend to be less transparent and allow less participation and a more restricted locus of control.

effects as the distribution of power changes among relevant actors. Significant changes are likely to deeply transform the institutional setting according to the evolving interests of incumbents, variations in their capability and influence, or their substitution for new ones.

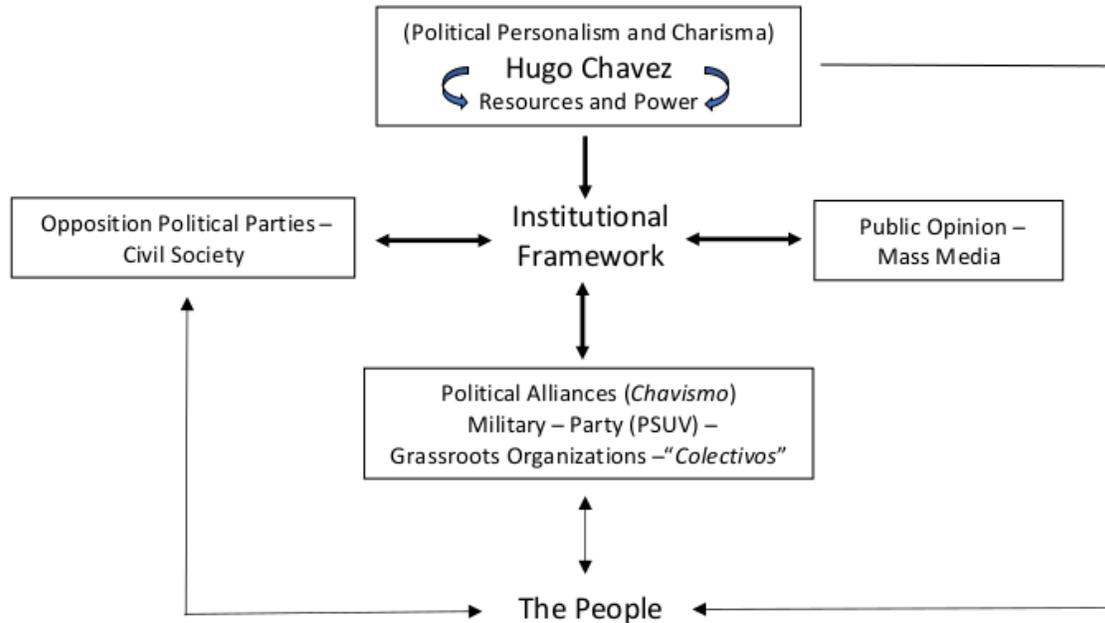
Exceptionally, we will find cases in which a power holder is able to monopolize the exercise of political power and determinate the shape of the institutional setting according to their own vision and preferences. This requires very particular circumstances in which the accumulation of power is so extensive that there are no other actors capable of limiting the monopolistic use of power and resources. It does not mean that it will be possible to govern without institutions, but rather, that the effect of institutions will be attenuated or, in any case, will not significantly restrain the autocratic exercise of political power, decision making, and resource management. In this case, political personalism will substitute, to a point, for institutional mechanisms, and governability will build upon the personal characteristics of the charismatic ruler. Mahoney and Thelen (2009) have determined that rulers with low requirements from society and elevated levels of support will have to make fewer concessions to associates than those who are more dependent on private revenues. This point is crucial in analyzing institutional development in Venezuela over the last twenty years. Clearly, Chávez initiated a process of institutional displacement (Mahoney and Thelen 2009), which implied the destruction and substitution of institutional references associated with representative democracy, and the continued substitution of the rules of the game in place before 1998, by establishing a new set of rules. After an early rupture, the process of institutional displacement developed gradually, responding to contextual and distributional changes associated with the particularities of the political context in Venezuela.

The following diagram (Figure 2) depicts, in a simplified manner, the concentration of power under Chávez. As we can see, he was at the center of the game and above the institutional framework, which implies the personalistic management of power and resources and an attenuated institutional effect. Members of the governmental alliance played a secondary role, as they were dependent on the presidency and had no autonomous use of power and resources. The opposition played a marginal role, with influence on mass media and public opinion but with low levels of control over resources, and its political influence was limited to middle- and upper-class sectors, with very low impact on the popular class. Public opinion was divided as the government advanced overly aggressive communications policies aimed at the control of public speech and of mass media. Chávez was permanently positioned in the public space. His speeches and images were presented to the public as iconic representations of the revolution and its ideals. In the popular Venezuelan expression, “he was running alone,” without any serious competition. He certainly did lose the popular referendum to change Article 69 of the constitution to declare the country a socialist state, however, he was able to introduce changes by passing laws with the approval of a favorable majority in Congress.¹⁶ As the theory indicates, Chávez did not have to make important concessions to his competitors or to his

¹⁶ Changes such as the introduction of Councils of Popular Power and Communal Missions (local popular organization structures financed by the government to attend to specific areas), the approval of state and communal ownership of the means of production, among many others, were crucial to fortifying Chávez’s leadership and control over the country.

allies, nor did he need to rush to complete the process of institutional transition and consolidation. Specific measures were enough to guarantee the accumulation of power and strengthen political control. This dramatically changed after Chávez’s death.

Figure 2



A New Political Coalition

After the death of Hugo Chávez institutional change became a matter of political survival. As we have seen, Chávez was central in determining the characteristics of the political order after 1999. His death produced an obvious crisis within the revolution. High instability and increases in uncertainty appeared, as the institutional model did not seem capable of holding equilibrium in the absence of its pivotal player. Bets were high, as there was not a single player with the ability to monopolize political power and stabilize the system alone. Chávez’s absence from the Venezuelan political game had a destabilizing effect. This explains the secrecy surrounding his illness and treatment. To this day there is no certainty about the exact date of his death. Chávez made his last public declarations on December 8, 2012, before traveling to receive cancer treatment in Cuba. On that occasion Chávez reviewed his medical condition, announced his future surgery, and named his vice president, Nicolás Maduro, as his successor. He asked the country to vote for Maduro in case of his demise and recommended that Chavismo, the “popular forces,” and the military work together under collective leadership “to support the Bolivarian Revolution and the construction of the Bolivarian Democracy and to defend the political project and the Homeland against its enemies.” Chávez closed his message by calling for patriotic unity and support for the government. Chávez’s passing a few

months later did not represent the end of Chavismo, as many used to think, but rather, it implied important challenges to its ability to maintain power and hold the government together.

Unlike Chávez, Maduro was not considered by many as the natural leader of the revolution. Without a doubt, his most important credential was his appointment as successor by Chávez himself. However, this did not seem to be enough to guarantee his victory in the upcoming elections or the stability of the government. In fact, Maduro was perceived by both the opposition and Chavismo as a weak leader and less-than-ideal candidate. If Chavismo was to maintain power, a rearrangement of internal coalitions was required, as well as major changes in the distribution of power. The president would be forced to share power and resources in order to remain in his position. This variability defined the shape of institutional transformation in Venezuela during Maduro's early period. Four factors must be taken into consideration:

a) No one was able to monopolize political power; there were too many factors in place. Chavismo was divided among different groups with strong conceptual, ideological, and chrematistic differences, and weak or sector-related leadership.

b) The degree of affinity between the leaders and the masses was reduced. Maduro lacked charisma and the desired discourse to address the people and call for mass mobilization.

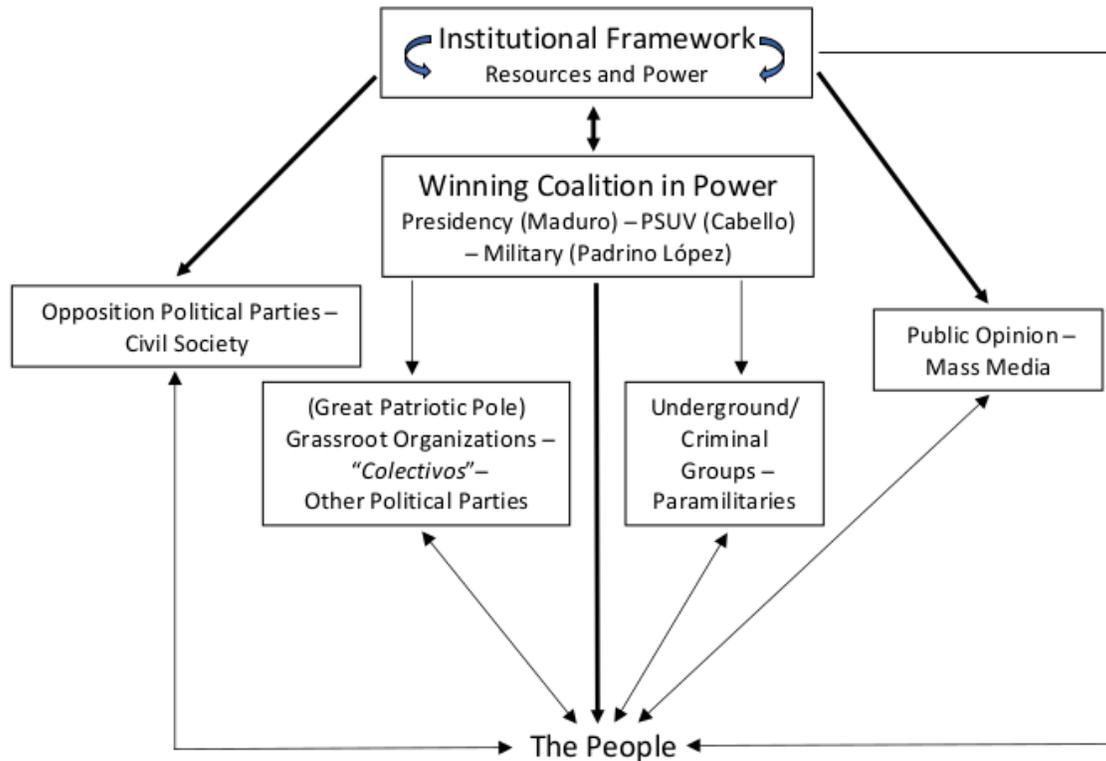
c) The opposition perceived that there was an opportunity to regain power and organized for electoral and political confrontation.

d) Maduro's term coincided with a drop in oil prices on international markets, therefore, there were fewer resources to distribute among incumbents and the people.

Very soon after Chávez's death it became evident that the institutional platform that favored governability and order for the former president was not going to do so for his successor. Venezuela entered into a still-unresolved phase of political instability which Chavismo faced by building a winning coalition that has advanced institutional changes to support its position in government and promote its political survival.¹⁷

¹⁷ The idea of political survival is taken directly from Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003.

Figure 3



As we can see in Figure 3, there are major changes in the diagram depicting the distribution of power and influence in the political system. Hegemonic management of power and resources is replaced by a strong political alliance. Power is shared among the key instances that conform the winning coalition and its representatives: President Nicolás Maduro, the strongman Diosdado Cabello (vice president of the PSUV), and the military. Each element maintains subordinate groups and alliances inside and outside the institutional framework and also has developed capacities for resource management. Maduro was required to distribute control over resources and direct political control over the members of the alliance and to develop new social programs for the people. In this case institutions are at the top of the political process, as swift mechanisms of control were developed, including tough regulations on the mass media and the expression of public opinion, further erosion of the division of power, new legislation granting the government control over the population, and surveillance and increased police capabilities. One can say, indeed, that Chavismo has survived a period of severe political turmoil and confrontation due to increases in political control, military support, ideological operations, and repression. Maduro, along with Cabello, controls the party structure and paramilitary forces; both are able to mobilize people for public demonstrations. General Padrino López, minister of Defense, controls the military, whose presence in the government is significant. An implosion occurred inside Chavismo, but also an adjustment in the distribution of

power and influence. Maduro became the center of the distributive process, however, he was unable to maintain his position without the support of the PSUV and the armed forces. These alliances moved toward the absolute control of public administration.

After an electoral defeat in the legislative elections in December 2015, Chavismo managed to win later electoral contests and by the beginning of 2018 controlled over 80% of state governorships and over 90% of local governments. However, the opposition has a majority in the National Assembly, which eventually was substituted in functions by the election in 2017 of a Constitutive National Assembly (ANC), a parallel body controlled by Chavismo that has assumed legislative responsibilities (McCoy 2017). The Supreme Court and the ANC have been particularly important as they have legitimized the exercise of power by Maduro—the Court by conveniently reinterpreting legislation, and the ANC by passing new legislation that heavily restricts civil liberties.

New legislation such as the law against hate represents movement toward the restriction of civil liberties. In this case, people can be prosecuted for protesting against the government if the courts consider the protest hateful. The point is that the government has appointed over 80% of the judges, many of whom are associated with the PSUV. Questions about court impartiality and access to justice have arisen. The Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE)—the representation of electoral power—is also controlled by Chavismo. Over the past few years, it has passed regulations that changed the structure of electoral processes. This has guaranteed “special advantages” for governmental candidates to the detriment of the opposition: the use of state resources in electoral campaigns, the concentration of state messages in mass media, mobilization of voters, pressure on public servants, and so on. The Venezuelan political system does not assure conditions for competitive elections or cooperative behavior, as there is important unevenness in the distribution of costs and benefits among the different players. Resources have been used as a punishment or cost, depending on political closeness to the government. Those who are close to the government tend to receive a bigger share, while those in opposition pay higher costs. For instance, autonomous public universities, which have assumed a critical position in defense of democratic values, have not received budgetary increases since 2007, despite high levels of inflation. The same can be observed in other sectors: neutral mass media receive state publicity, and industries close to the government obtain credits or easy access to international currency. The institutional framework is designed to discriminate between political opponents, neutrals, and friends and allies, distributing resources in response to those criteria. Political parties are subjected to pressure and their leaders are permanently attacked by governmental entities and are increasingly prosecuted, sent into exile, or jailed.

The Maduro government has used several mechanisms of social control, for example:

- a) Mass mobilization has been extensively employed as a countermeasure against the opposition; the government builds the perception that the majority of the population supports it.
- b) The public space has been colonization through control of the mass media and pressure on journalists and editors; the voices of government representatives sending messages to the people are constantly present.

c) The government has used pork-barrel incentives to directly subsidize poor people and then demand their mobilization and support.

d) Governmental control of the economy allows the distribution of food and medicine, mainly among supporters and popular sectors.

These are just few examples of the measures taken by the government to further centralize political power and administrative controls.

The Institutional Framework of Authoritarianism

After Chávez's death the most important question in Venezuelan politics was whether Chavismo would survive and how. Several scenarios were projected. The possibilities lay between a transition toward a liberal democracy or a traditional dictatorship (Kornblith 2013), but none of the anticipated results occurred. Chavismo seems to be, at least by Latin American standards, a new phenomenon: a tight coalition between the military and the party, with strong popular and cultural roots, and, allegedly, sturdy relations with paramilitary groups and criminal gangs that function outside the institutional framework. Chavismo uses democratic means to change the rules of the game and monopolize political power, undermining civil society and economic sectors and controlling public space to dismantle democracy (Puerta Riera 2017). Changes in legislation gradually allowed the introduction of socialism and participatory democracy. Chavismo moved toward the construction of hegemonic power and further control over a polarized society. This process has taken almost twenty years. There has been a gradual accumulation of power in association with the armed forces and the police as mechanisms for social control. Chavismo has managed to centralize resources, weaken opponents, and build support by directly subsidizing irregular groups, colectivos, and community councils. It also controls popular arenas, mass media, and productive sectors, while simultaneously increasing the use of force to minimize protests and discourage participation in civic and political activities. Despite problems associated with the lack of legitimacy in the exercise of power, Chavismo is moving toward the construction of hegemony in the control and distribution of political power.

In contemporary Venezuela, institutional change has been a double-edged process. Increases in power accumulation and centralization have allowed Chavismo to produce institutional transformations, particularly through changes in legislation and administrative procedures. In turn, these changes have allowed it to accumulate more power. Chavismo has increased its control over public administration. The government acts as the representative of the national will, and as such, makes decisions and distributes resources without seeking consensus. Indeed, all of this represents an authoritarian turn resulting from asymmetries in the distribution of power, lack of opposing forces, and reduced possibilities for challengers. It has limited the availability of mechanisms and options for alternative solutions (Weyland 2008). The accumulation of power has given Chavismo the possibility of changing the institutional framework at its convenience. At this point neither civil society nor opposing political parties seems capable of challenging the further development of an authoritarian regime in Venezuela.

Conclusion

Over the past twenty years, Chavismo has tried to solve an equilibrium problem through the accumulation of power. Its solution would reflect the distribution of power in the society, favoring the interests of stronger players, winning coalitions, and support groups. Hegemonic equilibrium has nothing to do with fairness. Social order can be built on democratic values and consensus, or on the use of force, ideology, and imposition. Stronger players may have the ability and resources to move the “game set” so that transactions will produce an asymmetric distribution of cost and benefits among the players. In the long run equilibrium would be supported by the dissuasive or literal use of force and last as long as resources are available. The current political situation in Venezuela is subject to a very unstable equilibrium due to an economic crisis and lack of support from the middle and productive sectors. Chavismo, however, has projected an institutional trajectory that is replacing existing rules with new ones. This supposes a new distribution of costs and benefits among players as the rules of the game have a distributive effect that benefits some interests and not others—the former supported institutional change, and the latter attempted to stop it. The result of this confrontation will determine the equilibrium chosen by the society as the constitutive form of social order. As a result, some will be included in the system, and some will not. So far, the interests of those excluded have not been taken into consideration in the definition of public policies. Middle sectors have been marginalized in the allocation of resources and have also been politically marginalized from processes of political recognition and redistribution as the game-set varies.

Venezuela is going through a process of institutional change that is fostered by shifts in the distribution of political power and resources. Increasing asymmetries in the distribution of power have a negative effect on democracy; those who accumulate power will keep doing so as long as they can. Institutional transition will favor authoritarianism when institutional limits are fragile or when the institutional framework evolves to protect the interests of the incumbents. Venezuela is experiencing a process of political transition that has produced high levels of political instability, protests, raids, economic deprivation, poverty, repression, and, above all, a redefinition of the institutional framework. In part, this process resulted from the inability of the institutional framework to ensure stability after the death of Hugo Chávez. From an institutional structure based on charismatic political personalism, there was a transition to an institutional framework based on decision making by the coalition party leadership. Empirical evidence shows that when there are important asymmetries in the distribution of power, institution development does not favor the construction and permanence of cooperative equilibrium; instead, under those circumstances, institutions tend to be predatory, as they have the potential for distorting social behavior and weighing differently the interests in place. When players share equivalent capabilities and/or when they need each other, cooperative behavior will prevail—firstly, because no one has the ability to impose their strength over others, and secondly, because survival requires the participation of the majority, as is the case when the government needs private investments or taxes to function.

In Venezuela we find a very distorted situation in which unequal distribution of power has led to the constitution of an institutional framework that certainly benefits the interests of the members

of the coalition in power, its allies, and clients, but overall, it produces negative social revenue that is evident in the deterioration of society's living conditions, the lack of food and medicine, and the substantial migration that the country has experienced in the last few years. Despite massive protests and general discontent, it appears difficult under current circumstances to oppose the government effectively, since protests are criminalized, and protesters prosecuted. Despite a huge economic crisis and strong international pressures, the administration has managed to survive and control the structure of the state for its own interests.

Polarization has favored a process of incremental institutional change based on an asymmetric distribution of power and resources, a demobilized and demoralized civil society, and increased political confrontation. In an incrementalist process the government moves to augment its control over society by introducing changes in legislation that justify and support its actions. In these circumstances, gains associated with social cooperation cannot materialize. Equilibrium is fragile and circumstantial. The government is obliged to adjust to challenges as they emerge, and uncertainty and risk are high. Opponents appear recurrently, forcing the government to use coercion to reduce their impact on the political system. This requires high levels of resources and supposes a negative impact on legitimacy. In the long run the government needs to reproduce asymmetries in order to maintain its strategic advantage and hegemony, but this increases the cost of dominance and destroys the possibilities for mutual gains. In fact, the system responds to the logic in which the "winner takes all" and uses its power to keep winning by accommodating the rules of the game to its needs and requirements. The government has no incentive to negotiate new agreements, and asymmetric power distribution assures its ability to make decisions without consent.

Agreements are required only inside the winning coalition, which ends up privatizing public interests, reducing civil liberties, and limiting freedom of expression. It is not by chance that during the last fifteen years there has been a substantial reduction in public opinion programs on radio and television. The privatization of social functions affects the interests of many. People have left the country by the thousands. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency, by June 2019 over four million Venezuelans had left,¹⁸ in what could be considered the most significant migration in the modern history of Latin America. To be sure, in Venezuela there are regular elections, yet there is no transparency in the results. There are no probes of fraud in vote counting, but certainly there is strong control over voters, blackmail is used, and public resources are employed in campaigns. Over the years the presidency has increased its control over the Electoral Council and the judiciary, which has shielded its control of electoral processes. Severe doubts about electoral results has emerged at least since 2013. The legitimacy of origin of the current government is, at least, questionable. Consequently, it is difficult to assure that the government represents the interests of the population; indeed, it functions as a corporation whose interests are imposed on the population in the context of a supervening institutional framework.

Our case demonstrates that power is a driving force in institutional transformation. An equilibrium of forces and the wide incorporation of interests are required for the constitution of a

¹⁸ <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2019/6/5cfa2a4a4/refugees-migrants-venezuela-top-4-million-unhcr-iom.html>.

democratic institutional framework. Democracy requires bargaining and agreements among actors of similar strength. Agreements are facilitated among those who require the contribution of others to survive. Democracy requires the recognition of the other and a willingness to find solutions to conflicts of interest. Authoritarianism is by definition an imposition of particular interests backed by the use of force over those with limited capacities or abilities to resist oppression. Institutions are not necessarily impartial or just. The construction of impartiality and fairness within the institutional framework will depend on the distribution of power among relevant actors, and the ability to avoid the monopolization of power, limit the privatization of public interests, and guarantee the proper distribution of costs and benefits among the members of the society. In Venezuela we find a distortion in the distributive process and a monopolization of power and resources that have affected the well-being of the population, their freedoms, and their ability to make autonomous decisions. This represents a very important challenge to the future of democracy.

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