“A Weapon as Powerful as the Vote”: Street Protest and Electoral Politics in Caracas, Venezuela before Hugo Chávez

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of History in the Graduate School of Duke University

2009
ABSTRACT

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Abstract

On 23 January 1958, Marcos Pérez Jiménez was ousted in a “democratic revolution” whose emblematic images featured a vast public housing project built by the dictator in the heart of downtown Caracas, next to the Presidential Palace, Ministry of Defense, and Congress. Officially named "2 December" to memorialize the coup that consolidated his rule, the neighborhood and its residents suffered harshly. It was renamed the "23 January" (23 de enero) in honor of the 1958 revolution. This study investigates the relationship between this parish and the Venezuelan democratic system that would, over the following decades, be praised for its stability and was believed to have made the urban popular sectors dependent on party and state. This study disrupts such an interpretation by exploring how oppositional politics, forms of street protest, and voting combined to produce evolving understandings of political participation and legitimate contestation.

Three key moments anchor the story told in this dissertation: the transition to electoral democracy during the 1958 revolution and its aftermath; the late 1970s and early 1980s period of structural crisis that lead to dramatic seizures of public vehicles; and the 1989 Caracazo massacre in which Venezuela’s newly elected President shocked the nation by ending the country’s largest urban protest with a massacre that killed hundreds. The dissertation ends with reflections on the continuity of in political and protest behavior in el 23 under former military rebel Hugo Chávez who was elected to the presidency in 1998. While the urban popular sectors’ are depicted by some as having
been awoken to national politics under Chavez, this study establishes powerful continuities going back to 1958 in this stronghold of Chavez’s “Bolivarian Revolution.”

A comprehensive and systematic canvas of thirty years’ of newspaper and periodical sources on el 23 provides a firm foundation for the narrative. It also draws on primary sources from the Banco Obrero, the US National Archives, and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, while making extensive use of polling data and electoral statistics from 1958 to 1989. This archival work allowed for the success of extensive oral histories and ethnographic observation carried out in the 23 de enero over ten months between 2004 and 2005.
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This project is an effort to come to terms with the roots and legacies of a massacre that dramatically informed my upbringing in Venezuela. In February 1989 mass protests over neoliberal economic adjustment policies rocked Venezuela’s capital Caracas, claiming the lives of untold hundreds after the state unleashed unprecedented repression to reassert control. Universally known as the *Caracazo*, this event also fatally wounded a democratic political system once praised for its high levels of stability. Coming of age in the wake of the *Caracazo*, the event was for me and many youth a watershed that marked the start of a period of crisis that included ongoing social unrest, attempted coups, presidential impeachments, and an economic meltdown. For some like my parents, it also meant leaving Venezuela during the time of highest tension in the mid 1990s. In this sense Alvaro Velasco and Luz Astrid Cañete deserve my first thanks. Their no-doubt traumatic decision provided their children with more stability than they might have found at home, and set me on the path that would ultimately allow me to return to Venezuela to make sense of the history that occasioned our departure. I suspect it was a path they did not imagine for me, but their support and encouragement was unflinching as this project took shape, including my return to Venezuela at a new moment of high tension under the presidency of Hugo Chávez. For that and so much more I thank them.

At Boston College, David Quigley and Deborah Levenson first provided me with the impetus to examine the interplay of urban life, democratization, social movements, and the state. In particular, their commitment to the study of social and political
disenfranchisement, and of modes of resistance, in US and Latin American history respectively, helped shape my early interest in race as one avenue for engaging with the grassroots histories of popular sectors. They were also the first to suggest I consider graduate school, and gave generously of their time to help me get there as did Kelly Wise, Clement White, and Alexandra Cornelius at the Institute for the Recruitment of Teachers in Andover, MA.

It was at the IRT as an intern in the summer of 1999 that I learned critical vocabularies around race, class, and culture that would form the basis for my first research on the legacies of race in Venezuelan politics as a graduate student at Duke. This work, which became my Master’s thesis, benefitted enormously from the guidance of Greg Grandin with his commitment to a politically informed scholarship. It also relied on Charles M. Payne, whose work and courses challenged me to go beyond the anecdotal when considering oral sources, and thus provided an invaluable methodological foundation whose influence can be seen in this dissertation. This work’s interdisciplinary orientation is the product of conversations held in seminars, talks, and working groups at the Duke University Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies (CLACS) during my coursework between 2000 and 2003. Under the leadership of Natalie Hartman, Bonnie McManus, and Jenny Snead Williams, the CLACS was the sort of vibrant, intellectually stimulating space where ideas developed in conversation with faculty and graduate students from the Carolina and Duke Consortium in Latin American Studies.

The Duke CLACS also provided early funding support for my research on race in Venezuela. A summer 2002 travel grant brought me to Caracas during the fallout of a
failed civil-military coup that just weeks earlier temporarily ousted President Hugo Chávez. The April coup pitted organized business groups, trade unions, and a largely middle class civil society against urban popular sectors that made up the core of Chavez supporters. For 48 hours Chávez was held under arrest and an interim president sworn in from the ranks of the business elite with U.S. support. But in a dramatic turn of events, a multitude including tens of thousands of residents from the 23 de enero neighborhood surrounded the presidential palace located a short distance away, helping to bring about Chávez’s reinstatement. Supplementing my research on race with unstructured, casual conversations with 23 de enero residents about their heterogeneous and sometimes contradictory memories of the April events alerted me to the possibility that a grassroots study of this symbolically and spatially central neighborhood could provide a new understanding of the development of urban popular politics in Venezuela.

As the project took shape, a Summer Research Fellowship from the Duke University Graduate School allowed me to spend two months in 2003 researching the Caracazo. My extended fourteen months of fieldwork in Caracas between 2004 and 2005 was supported by a generous International Dissertation Research Fellowship (IDRF) from the Social Science Research Council (SSRC). While in Caracas, the staff of the Hemeroteca at the Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV) were very helpful as they patiently attended to my seemingly endless requests for thirty years of newspapers housed in their collection. Likewise the staff of the then-Instituto Nacional de la Vivienda helped me for three months as I combed through minutes of the old Banco Obrero during its heyday in the 1950s when the project was built. An Albert J. Beveridge Grant from
the American Historical Association funded travel to Costa Rica to work at the Inter
American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) library in San José, Costa Rica, where the
library’s staff offered not only their archival assistance but also helped me to navigate
legal documents and language with which I was unfamiliar in the Caracazo case files.
My academic affiliation while at Caracas was at the Centro de Estudios del Desarrollo
(Center for Development Studies, CENDES) of the UCV, a supportive and stimulating
environment in which to begin to analyze my research and generate the outlines of what
became the arguments presented here. All the while my sister, anthropologist Andreina
Velasco, ably transcribed dozens of interviews amounting to over 100 recorded hours
almost as quickly as I could conduct them, thus helping to move the research along.

This study would not have been possible, however, without the warm support I
received from the people of the 23 de enero. The community that welcomed me in the 23
de enero had every reason to be skeptical of a US-trained, middle-class Venezuelan
asking probing questions about their lives and politics. Indeed I arrived just weeks after a
2004 presidential recall referendum that had once again stirred the embers of polarization
in Venezuela in the era of Hugo Chávez. Over time they gained confidence that my
commitment to learning about their neighborhood’s history was serious and not episodic.
As a result more and more women, men, and youth granted me entry into their living
rooms, domino games, offices, and especially their memories. Their patience and
generosity never ceased to amaze me, especially as I gently (and sometimes not so
gently) pressed them to move beyond familiar narratives, to consider contradictions in
their testimonies, or to revisit moments long since forgotten. In particular, Gustavo
Borges, Omar Machado, Lisandro Pérez, Juan Contreras, and the Santana Family spent many hours with me during my ten month stay in the neighborhood. Each reflected different strands of a larger, common history of social and political activism in the neighborhood. They did not always agree with my interpretations – or with one another’s – but by engaging and debating with me and each other they offered a glimpse into the vibrancy that has long shaped the politics of el 23. If this study captures even a small part of that spirit, it will have proven worthwhile.

In late 2005 as my fieldwork came to an end, the SSRC-IDRF program under the leadership of Nicole Stahlman coordinated a conference that brought me in contact with an interdisciplinary community of SSRC staff, fellows, and faculty. In particular I would like to thank Jason Seawright and Eric Hershberg for stimulating conversations about the role of political parties in Venezuelan and Latin American politics at large. At every stage of this project I have also benefitted from the work and guidance of Venezuelanist scholars in the Venezuela and in the United States. Steve Ellner, Margarita López Maya, and Javier Corrales have all offered extensive feedback on parts of this dissertation. I have especially benefitted from Steve Ellner’s vast, encyclopedic knowledge of modern Venezuelan history and politics which saved me from errors both factual and conceptual. As a member of my dissertation committee, he also carefully read the full dissertation. More recently, Venezuela’s newfound prominence during the Chávez presidency has attracted a new generation of scholars committed to studying the interplay of state and popular sectors in Venezuela. I have drawn support from this new cohort of Venezuela specialists, including Olga González-Silen, Sujatha Fernandes, Luis Duno Gottberg, and
David Smilde, all of whom have provided helpful feedback at various stages of this project.

As research turned to writing, many critics offered feedback on my initial findings and formulations. Here I want to thank the participants of the 2006 Latin American Labor History Conference at Duke, and in particular Anne Farnsworth-Alvear, Joan Bak, and Thomas Klubock for comments that urged me not to overstate the reach of my evidence, to clarify my conceptual language, and to locate my work more explicitly within the social movements literature. I owe special thanks to Mark Healey and his co-organizers of the 2006 “Reimagining Venezuela” conference at the University of California at Berkeley. This conference provided the first opportunity to present my initial findings to scholars of Venezuela, including Fernando Coronil. And at the 2007 “Political Imaginaries in Latin America” conference in Indiana University, Jeff Gould and Daniel James pushed me to think about the parallels between the uses of history as part of revolutionary projects in Venezuela and elsewhere in the region. As a Five College Fellow at Hampshire College in 2006-2007, my colleagues at the School of Social Science, especially Frank Homlquist and Margaret Cerullo, read and commented on early papers from this dissertation. Omar Dahi cheerfully played the crucial role of fine friend and confidant to a young scholar grappling with teaching as well as writing a dissertation. And while in Amherst, MA, Sonia Alvarez welcomed me into the University of Massachusetts Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies, which provided a venue to share my work with area Latin Americanists, and to consider its larger theoretical implications. In particular, I would like to thank Jeffrey Rubin, Gianpaolo Baiocchi,
Millie Thayer, and Agustín Lao Montes for comments during the “Interrogating the Civil Society Agenda” Conference at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in April 2008.

Both in developing the project and in bringing it to fruition, I have relied on Jolie Olcott’s keen analytic around questions of state/society relations to improve the ideas in this study. As it becomes a manuscript, it will draw more directly from the gendered analysis of citizenship, revolution, and collective action that has made Jolie’s work a reference in the field. I should also like to thank Gunther Peck for his participation in my dissertation committee, especially for helping me to consider the methodological implications of the concept of the multitude, as well as the importance of the built environment to a study of everyday politics.

I long relied on the community of graduate students with whom I shared coursework at Duke – Linda Rupert, Silvermoon, Dan Golonka, Gonzalo Lamana, David Carlson, Joshua Nadel, and James Palmer – for the good cheer they brought to an intense intellectual experience. I would especially like to thank Myrna Ivonne Wallace Fuentes, Thomas D. Rogers, and Jody Pavilack for years of camaraderie, guidance and advice. More recently, Katharine French-Fuller, Kristen Wintersteen, Bryan Pitts, and Elizabeth Shezko read, commented on, and edited various parts of this dissertation. Their generosity in helping a student they barely knew speaks to the strengths of the graduate community of Latin Americanists at Duke, one that I had the privilege to become reacquainted with while presenting parts of chapters three and four at the 2nd Latin American History Graduate Student Workshop at Duke in December 2008.
The continuing strength of Duke’s Latin American History community is the work of John French. Indeed John is the common thread among all these communities – of scholarship, of mentorship, of criticism, of support. Early in our collaboration John commented on a paper where I first showed interest in tackling the modern history of Venezuelan politics, noting simply, “Your work is important.” It was of course a vote of confidence. But more than that, it also illustrated John’s abiding sense that as historians, our work matters and that this involves a responsibility and commitment that extends beyond the archives and reflects a life lived at the service of critical thought. Over the years this dynamic has informed every one of our exchanges. John will always have my gratitude for teaching me more through deeds than words that history, as the social historian Marc Bloch put it, is a craft more than a discipline. And while his intellectual contribution has improved every word of this dissertation, the shortcomings that remain are of my doing.

Jan, Paul, and Elizabeth French deserve special recognition for bearing with me as I made extraordinary demands on John’s time and energy. Their patience speaks volumes to the bonds of love and family that sustain any long term project. Over the years, as a Venezuelan undergraduate in the United States, George, Janet, and Julie Paradis welcomed me warmly into their home, and their extended family. And it is the love of Aimée Paradis Velasco that has sustained me. The dissertation required long stretches of separation, putting some dreams on hold and sacrificing others. Now that it is done, we can look forward to realizing some of those dreams. Finally, at the last stages of this dissertation, Estela de la Hoz de Sandobal passed away in Venezuela. In the
course of this project I have been exposed to popular sectors’ perseverance and resiliency in light of challenges I could only imagine through text and testimonies. As this process unfolded it became clear that it was tata who first taught me about the everyday struggles of the working classes. I am grateful that I had the opportunity to share that with her before she passed away in January 2009. Her death, at a critical time in writing this dissertation, provided me with the motivation I needed to see the project to its end. As such, this study is dedicated to her memory.
Introduction

From Revolution to Massacre: Moving Beyond Exceptionalism in Venezuelan History

On 27 February 1989 the urban working classes in Caracas and neighboring cities rose up in protest over the effects of a set of market reforms implemented days earlier. The reforms included a doubling of the price of internally consumed oil, a key part of a dramatic austerity plan signed with the International Monetary Fund in order to refinance Venezuela’s debt, which had reached a staggering 41 percent of the national GDP in 1988.\(^1\) Faced with a sharp overnight increase in public transportation costs, unwilling patrons took to the streets, setting ablaze tires and blocking major arteries. Ongoing labor strife in the police force delayed intervention, in the wake of which large segments of the urban poor in Caracas took to the streets, chanting “We are hungry!” after a decade of increasing poverty and marginalization. They broke into grocery stores first, followed by appliance outlets and clothing shops. Middle class neighborhoods had organized themselves into “military brigades,” rounding up weapons to defend their communities against “riotous masses.” “If they come this way we have to shoot them,” one said.\(^2\)

After 24 hours President Carlos Andrés Pérez, who had vowed on the campaign trail not to negotiate with the IMF, ordered the deployment of Army units who followed a

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\(^1\) Terry Lynn Karl, “The Venezuelan Petro-State and the Crisis of 'Its' Democracy,” in Venezuelan Democracy under Stress, ed. Jennifer McCoy, et al. (Miami: North South Center, University of Miami, 1995), 42.

1960s contingency plan to “seek and destroy urban guerrillas.”\(^3\) The Army’s deployment and Congress’s repeal of constitutional freedoms brought a “precarious normalcy” to Caracas five days later.\(^4\) The Inter-American Court of Human Rights later found that “The Armed Forces opened fire against crowds and against homes, which caused the death of many children and innocent people who were not taking part in criminal acts … there was a common pattern of behavior characterized by the disproportionate use of the Armed Forces in poorer residential districts.”\(^5\)

What began as a protest against transportation fee hikes became, to cite one human rights activist, “an act of historic proportions, unique and unrepeatable.” One political leader flatly admitted, “We were taken by surprise,” while days later a stunned Pérez concluded: “it is dangerous to defy poverty.”\(^6\) Officials reported 276 deaths, while discoveries of mass graves led some to estimate between 750 and 1000 fatalities, only two from the military.\(^7\) The Inter-American Court of Human Rights later found that “indiscriminate firing by agents of the Venezuelan state” led to most casualties. “The Armed Forces opened fire against crowds and against homes, which caused the death of many children and innocent people who were not taking part in criminal acts … there

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was a common pattern of behavior characterized by the disproportionate use of the Armed Forces in poorer residential districts."

In the ensuing decade, a continuous wave of social and political upheaval shook the basic assumptions that had made Venezuela an “exception” of political stability and enlightened statesmanship vis-à-vis the rest of Latin America. Indeed, Venezuela’s “Fourth Republic” had stood as Latin America’s oldest continuously running democratic system, founded in 1958 when military insurgents and the Caracas populace ousted Dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez in what they referred to as a “democratic revolution.” But in 1992 sectors in the Army and Air Force launched failed coup d’états in February and November, respectively, the first such moves by Venezuela’s military in decades. In 1993, facing mounting opposition not just from public opinion but even from one-time supporters, President Pérez resigned to avoid impeachment over a corruption scandal. Later that year, a candidate representing a coalition of minor parties won the presidency, marking the breakdown of Venezuela’s once renowned two-party system in place since 1958. By 1998, the election of Hugo Chávez Frías as president ushered the final curtain call of a forty-year political regime, surprising scholars who had long praised the strength of the Fourth Republic’s institutions, civilian statesmanship, and inclusive political culture as linchpins promoting social tranquility in this petro-state.

The subsequently termed Caracazo massacre revealed the existence of a hitherto socially and politically illegible urban population that remained outside Venezuela’s well-consolidated party and trade union system – long the hallmarks of institutional

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analysis about the country. It also exposed a profound misreading of the elasticity underlying the social pact between the state and what was thought of as a dependable and predictable urban populace. This dissertation examines the evolution of popular political consciousness in Caracas before the Caracazo through a study of Venezuela’s largest urban housing project – the 23 de enero neighborhood in downtown Caracas.

The 23 de enero occupies a central though as yet unexamined place in Venezuelan political history. Built between 1955 and 1958, the neighborhood was the brainchild of Dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez, who had come to rule over a rapidly urbanizing country in the midst of an oil boom. In Caracas, Venezuela’s administrative capital as well as its most populous city, Pérez Jiménez resolved to showcase a zeal for rapid and modernist construction that would come to characterize his government. In particular, he ordered the construction of South America’s largest housing project, comprised of 38 rectangular structures rising fifteen stories high and holding up to 450 apartments each. Naming it 2 de diciembre (2 December) to honor the 1952 coup that consolidated his rule, Pérez Jiménez built the project in downtown Caracas symbolically to evoke his control over the principal elements of society: the executive and legislative branches, the military, the church, and the urban proletariat. But in 1958, residents of the neighborhood played a vital role in the revolution that ousted Pérez Jiménez. Emblematic images of 23 January 1958 prominently featured 2 de diciembre residents whose participation symbolized the “victory of and for ordinary Venezuelans who rose up in

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unified rejection of tyranny.“

In turn, residents of the projects embraced the move to rename their neighborhood 23 de enero (23 January), an identity which linked them in name and in spirit with the fortunes of the infant democracy. Over the years, that tie forged in the crucible of 1958 long retained its hold on the national imagination, as reflected in one journalist’s 2002 comment: “To speak of the 23 de enero is to invoke the democratic spirit of the nation.”

Yet in 1989, three decades after the founding of Venezuela’s Fourth Republic, the 23 de enero neighborhood again took center stage in the ebb and flow of national politics, becoming a major participant in the Caracazo, the Americas’ largest and deadliest urban protest. At the time of the Caracazo, an estimated population of three hundred thousand had come to reside both in the blocks themselves and in slums that rose up in the surrounding hills. The central location of the 23 de enero neighborhood made it a target of particularly intense repression by the military, who claimed that its high-rise structure and unobstructed views over downtown Caracas posed the risk of sharpshooters. Residents later remembered those days as “interminable.”

Twenty years later, walls retain its scars: under coats of paint, bullet holes remain. In the Caracazo’s aftermath, few understood why and how the 23 de enero had become a combat zone, its population

12 Ibid.
seen as threats instead of the democratic heroes of old. Confronted with a massive
popular protest it failed to foresee, Pérez’s government had regained control but at the
highest cost in human lives since Venezuela’s mid-nineteenth century civil war.

This dissertation rests on the premise that only a focused study of Caracas’s
popular sectors – their origins, political histories, trajectories, and relationship with
Venezuela’s state – can provide an adequate basis for deciphering the changing popular
understandings of democracy and political loyalty that would lead to the Caracazo. It
asks the following questions: What were the bases for popular loyalty during the heyday
of the Fourth Republic, and what popular understandings of legitimate disloyalty
underlay the rebellious behavior seen during the 1989 protest? This approach raises a
larger question: How did popular sectors since 1958 interpret shifting structural
conditions and state policy, both in times of plenty and in times of scarcity? When
looking at the onset of economic crisis in the 1980s, how did popular perceptions of the
rise of neoliberalism contribute to shifting the parameters of formal and informal politics,
leading to the Caracazo and eventually to the 1998 election of Hugo Chávez Frías?

From Unforeseen Crisis to Inevitable Collapse: The View from Mainstream
Scholarship

The state’s violent response to a massive popular protest sacrificed the legitimacy
of a democratic regime long admired for its high levels of institutionalization and regular
alternation in power. As the budding democracy showed signs of durability in the 1960s,
scholarship on Venezuela came increasingly to hail enlightened statesmanship, strong
political parties, petroleum wealth, and firm electoral processes as the reasons behind its
distinctive stability and robust economic growth vis-à-vis the rest of Latin America. John Lombardi’s 1982 narrative of Venezuela’s development well-illustrated the historiographical dimensions that underlay a growing fixation on “Venezuelan exceptionalism”:

In recent years, Venezuela’s remarkable rebirth as a prosperous, dynamic, and democratic nation has attracted the interest of students of economic and political development who often explain this country’s renaissance in terms of dramatic change, revolutionary breaks with the past, and similar metaphors that evoke images on new beginnings and abrupt discontinuities. A corollary of this theory is that, because the Venezuela of petroleum is such a transformed place, the country’s Hispanic history since the sixteenth century is largely an irrelevant matter for those interested in current affairs.\(^{14}\)

For Lombardi, exceptionalism made difficult any form of comparative analysis. Ignoring the historical dimensions of Venezuelan success meant downplaying region-wide patterns of social and political life that might help to institutionalize democracy elsewhere in Latin America. Accordingly, Lombardi’s critique of exceptionalist ideology did not so much problematize standard narratives of Venezuelan modernization and political maturity; rather, it sought to do away with exceptionalism’s ahistorical tendencies. Venezuela was indeed exceptional, not despite but because of its history.

Lombardi’s critical appraisal thus hinged on a plea to make history relevant to the study of contemporary Venezuela. His argument recognized and exposed that history had been placed at the service of legitimating a vision of national progress conceived in the post-dictatorship by the architects of Venezuelan democracy for whom, according to anthropologist Fernando Coronil, the nation’s “development project was premised on the

projection of this exceptionalist myth about itself."\textsuperscript{15} The post-1958 period of durable, stable, and regularly alternating two-party government increasingly stood in contrast to Latin America’s fast-sprouting military dictatorships, under which widespread repression and protracted civil war often characterized bitterly contested rule. Yet Venezuelan democracy, underwritten by lucrative revenues from the rent of oil concessions, also stood in contrast to a national history marked less by traditions of civic consciousness and economic power than by legacies both of peripheral irrelevance in the colonial world-system, and of post-independence caudillo rule and incompetent political leadership. The primacy of oil and the effective management of its wealth by democratically elected, socially conscious leaders seemed to represent momentous quantitative and qualitative historical shifts that spoke of the rise of an entire new social fabric. Within and outside Venezuela pundits reconciled the paradox by crafting a national narrative commensurate with leaders’ image of Venezuela as a modern nation. History in this context was mined for evidence of avant-garde political thought and action most frequently expressed in terms of independence-era leaders and Bolivarian ideology. All else remained anomalous to the real disposition of Venezuelans for order and progress.\textsuperscript{16}

In this context, mainstream scholarship upheld the architects of Venezuela’s democratic metamorphosis as both unique in the region and fitting examples of the national penchant for liberal-democratic organization and corporate identity.\textsuperscript{17} In turn,\


\textsuperscript{17} Robert Jackson Alexander, \textit{The Venezuelan Democratic Revolution: A Profile of the Regime of Rómulo Betancourt} (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1964). John D. Martz, "Venezuela's "Generation of
this hagiographic treatment of Venezuela’s “Generation of ’28” – radical students who had unsuccessfully rebelled against Dictator Juan Vicente Gómez who ruled from 1908 to 1935, only to forge the foundation for Venezuela’s democratic system – provided a base for broader institutional analyses of the system of governance they had patiently crafted. Following peaceful elections and presidential succession in 1963, a successful transfer of power to the hands of Venezuelan conservatives after their 1968 electoral victory, and especially the 1969 military defeat of leftists guerrillas and their ensuing integration into the political structure through the establishment of a viable party system, academic attention turned to examine the structural and institutional bases of what seemed like an exceedingly precocious and inclusive democratic order. Where a focus on exceptional leadership marked the bedrock of studies on Venezuelan democracy in its formative stages, through the 1970s the spotlight of academic attention shone on the institutional resilience that characterized a new wave of mainstream scholarship.


Common interpretative threads, then, understood broad based popular support for Venezuelan democracy support to be a corollary of good governance and expanding economic growth. Consistently high voter turnout obviated the need for independent tests or studies of the popular bases undergirding the Fourth Republic. Accordingly, throughout the 1970s exceptionalism remained a viable formula: spendthrift government administrations financed renewed modernization drives both with revenues generated by lucrative oil booms, and with a policy of deficit spending underwritten by exaggerated expectations about future oil revenues. In this context, inertia typified political consciousness, prosperity bankrolled tranquility, and popular protest was defunct. Yet beginning in the 1980s world banks and lending agencies called in debts in response to default crises worldwide. Venezuelan leaders responded by devaluating the national currency and exhausting international reserves in order to service the debt, leading to inflation, recession, capital flight, and rising poverty. Alternative readings of Venezuelan democracy now suggested that excessive centralization of power around a

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strong leadership, though previously interpreted as a source of national stability, in fact had led to the institutionalization of an “elite political culture … that shut out new players.”

This language had roots in late 1960s and early 1970s research that levied similar class-oriented and dependency theory-based critiques to rebut exceptionalism. Frank Bonilla, Arturo Silva Michelena, and Rodolfo Quintero argued that far from instituting representative and inclusive politics, the democratic system inaugurated in 1958 had merely exchanged patriarchal networks that upheld the Juan Vicente Gómez and Marcos Pérez Jimenez regimes for clientelist networks, again facilitated by oil wealth but also made more dramatic by new transnational concerns. During the fragile presidencies of Rómulo Betancourt (1958-1963), Raul Leóní (1963-1968), and Rafael Caldera (1968-1973), intensification of the Cold War significantly recast Latin America’s geopolitical landscape. One on hand it forced figures like Betancourt, founder of the social democratic Acción Democratica (Democratic Action, AD) party, and other leaders

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26 Rodolfo Quintero, El Petróleo Y Nuestra Sociedad (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1970).
to quell what had once been fiery rhetoric vis-à-vis foreign interests. On the other hand, Cold War geopolitics provided the pretext for dismantling the rhetoric of political and economic nationalism which lay at the root of 1940’s popular activism. The once at hand nationalization of oil, a linchpin of AD’s pre-1958 discourse and ideology, became an untenable proposition as US influence increasingly rested its weight on the shoulders of Venezuelan political leaders, especially following Cuba’s 1959 revolution and its eventual communist orientation.

Yet for Bonilla, Michelena, and Quintero, the renunciation of previous “Venezuela para los Venezolanos” (Venezuela for Venezuelans) articulations could not be explained away solely in the context of the Cold War. Instead, these authors pointed to a deep-seated elitism with roots in oil development’s formative stages, a period marked by an attendant rise of new urban middle classes inspired by North Atlantic elite culture. Speaking about “universality” in democratic Venezuela, Rómulo Betancourt warned that: “… [C]urrents are conspiring against the basic structures of our national being: economically powerful groups, who think that only the European or the estadounidense is good, and the Venezuelan is awful. People who take great pride in calling ‘cocktail party’ something that is definitely an arrocito criollo (pot luck dinner).”

One Caracas

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daily ran an “American Life,” reporting on elite trends and fashions in vogue in the
United States, from Broadway openings to “happy hours” in New York city bars.²⁹

The skillful exercise of consensus politics had nevertheless contrived for decades
to keep such class antagonisms in check. Structural reforms in terms of economic
liberalism and political decentralization went ahead under the plausible assumption that
the pact between the state and society was sufficiently elastic.³⁰ But the Caracazo
exposed their profound misreading of the limits of elasticity, as well as of the popular
understandings of democracy and the development of popular political consciousness in
Venezuela. Venezuelan playwright José Ignacio Cabrujas had mused prior to the
Caracazo that “Oil is fantastic and induces fantasies … its power to awaken fantasies
enables state leaders to fashion political life into a dazzling spectacle of national progress
through tricks of prestidigitation.”³¹ His word choice was fitting. ‘Prestidigitation’ –
defined literally as the manual performance “of a trick or set of tricks so quickly that the
manner of execution cannot be observed” – functions on two levels. On one, it is
concerned with actual performance, with sorcerers’ ability. On the other, it makes basic
assumptions about those being enchanted. Truth will remain obscured so long as motion
is sufficiently quick; success or failure rests with the sorcerer, while those under her spell
are rendered inert, their ability to act critically and independently remains contingent on
performers’ mistakes, in turn placing the audience’s attendant actions in a reactive light.


³⁰ Héctor Valecillos T, El Reajuste Neoliberal En Venezuela: Ensayos De Interpretación Crítica, 1a ed.
(Caracas: Monte Avila Editores, 1992).

³¹ Quoted in Coronil, The Magical State, 2.
From an institutional perspective Venezuelans atop the political structure fully embraced the concept of a modern nation enjoying the full benefits of democratic governance. Their “shock” during the Caracazo was compatible with interpretations about popular sectors that cast their role in terms of spontaneity, helping to suggest that popular sectors too, were ‘shocked,’ even as they slowly tore away at the roots of Venezuela’s central myths in a process that would result in a dramatic reorientation of normative assumptions regarding race, class, and national identity. According to anthropologist Fernando Coronil, “After thirty years of stability supported by oil income and the parties’ control over popular sectors, these leaders believed that el pueblo was incapable of independent action.”

Among the urban middle classes, witnesses described crowds as “semi-naked in flip-flops, the women with their hair rolled up with paper cylinders … carrying in one hand a child and in the other their loot.”

Middle class neighborhoods had organized themselves into “military brigades,” rounding up weapons to defend their communities against “riotous masses.” “If they come this way we have to shoot them,” one said. Efforts to make sense of the chaos met with confusion; one reporter could not but help notice that “in Caracas there was a clear confrontation of classes: on one end the middle class, first frightened and then reacting against the violence; on the other end, the foreign-born lumpen – since neighboring governments have not respected our borders – dragging a sector of the proletariat and...

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32 Ibid., 376.


even a sector of the petty bourgeoisie that saw no harm in going along with events. Suddenly, Venezuelans understood that we have social classes.”

In the aftermath, comments regarding class divisions and the foreign pollution of Venezuelans’ exceptionalist dispositions underscored a pressing need to examine the “dominant memorialization” of Venezuela’s history. Elites, forced to see themselves as such, listened in disbelief as BBC reports laid bare the falsity of Venezuela’s myths of progress and democracy: “The hunger of Venezuelans forced them to go out to the streets to pillage supermarkets.”

Less clear are characterizations of protest by Venezuela’s popular classes as spontaneous. When seen by the state’s sorcerers, venerable prestidigitation tricks proceeded seemingly unchallenged. Yet at local levels of the urban landscape, serious battles over inclusion were waged throughout the formative stages of Venezuelan democracy, between 1958 and 1973. It was at these critical moments that “democracy’s leaders” sold Venezuelans the “origin myth of democracy,” characterized by “pacts and agreements” that made explicit a “transcendent collective accord” between el pueblo and its leaders – made especially evident in the case of the 23 de enero neighborhood.

Standard glosses of this process focused originally on leadership and later on

35 Ibid.

36 Coronil, The Magical State, 3. Indeed, coverage following the events stressed – even over massive material losses – the “psychic damage” of the Caracazo to “Venezuelans who suddenly discovered, without hopes of retreat, that they had impoverished themselves drastically.” “Impoverished” here meant a loss of prestige in the international community. Efrain de la Cerda, "La Intervención Militar Restableció El Orden," Zeta, 3 March 1989.


38 Coronil, The Magical State, 214..
institutionalism, as outlined above, suggesting that it transpired largely unhindered, hampered not by social conflict but rather by a lack of capital prior to the 1974 oil boom. This interpretation silences the active struggle that took place both in and over Venezuela’s urban popular sectors. If in its infancy Venezuela’s oil industry had unintentionally fostered migration to Caracas despite government efforts to halt urbanization, as a mature industrial complex under democratic leaders’ self-congratulatory visions of infinite wealth migrations away from the country and towards Caracas and other urban centers proceeded apace, again unintentionally as AD governments between 1958 and 1968 – repeating policies of de-urbanization first showed between 1945 and 1948 – only reluctantly invested in Caracas. But by 1968:

Caracas[had] by far the largest number of barrios of any Venezuelan city … and the juxtaposition of wealthy and the very poor [was] most striking … the affluence of the city, which attract[ed] large numbers of migrants, [was] misleading. Oil …[had] affected Caracas only indirectly through a growth of administration, services and building construction. Substantial growth [had] not been taking place, and unemployment and underemployment rates [were] extremely high.

Census figures lent these claims support. In 1972 Caracas harbored 247,000 unemployed workers, increasingly significant numbers of whom went into the informal economy. But this ‘aberration’ transcended census figures. In 1973 newspapers graphically


40 Susan Greenbaum, "Backgrounds of Political Participation in Venezuelan Barrios" (M.A., University of Kansas, 1968), 47.

reported on the 50 percent poverty rates in Caracas, just published by the National Statistics Institute. In this context, “tricks of prestidigitation,” deployed as magic to dazzle an enchanted public, may be more accurately framed as self-enchanting, constructed by and in relation to the elite sectors while effectively ignoring its receptivity at the social base. Yet these same analytical trends that resulted in a lack of attention to popular political consciousness before 1989 remained the preferred methods to study the crisis and fall of Venezuela’s Fourth Republic. Accordingly, while the Caracazo was seen to herald an era of increased unrest, the institutional foundations of Latin America’s oldest uninterrupted democracy continued to be viewed as sufficiently durable to weather the neoliberal storm.

But when corruption scandals, attempted military coups, a presidential impeachment, and banking crises – problems clearly stemming from faults within the institutional structure – followed the 1989 protest, these same analysts began to speak of the crisis of the Fourth Republic as ineluctable. In this scheme the Caracazo garnered

42 Jose Hernan Briceño, "Caracas Alcanzó Ayer 2,615,484 Habitantes Pero No Nos Alegremos, Porque El 44.9 Por Ciento De Esa Población Vive En La Marginalidad," El Nacional, 10 August 1973.


little significance as a foundational moment when compared to Hugo Chávez’s 1992 military coup.⁴⁶ A conventional wisdom bereft of a local perspective between 1958 and 1989 now narrated Venezuela’s crisis as that of a “democracy under stress.”⁴⁷ Some analysts went further, suggesting that the economic and political tensions expressed in daily street protests throughout the 1990s⁴⁸ in fact resulted from irrational popular sectors acting against the better judgments of reform minded politicians who well-understood Venezuela was far from infinitely wealthy, even if urban masses did not.⁴⁹ Focusing on questions of institutional decay, adjustment, or survival, this dominant approach was unable to take seriously the popular sectors to which society had been blind. In consequence, the popular dimensions of the Fourth Republic’s progressive breakdown remained as unexamined in the aftermath of the system’s downfall as they did at the height of its rise.⁵⁰


⁴⁷ McCoy, ed., *Venezuelan Democracy under Stress*.

⁴⁸ Margarita Lopez Maya, "Venezuela Despues Del Caracazo: Formas De Protesta En Un Contexto Desinstitucionalizado," (South Bend: Helen Kellog Institute, 1999).


Purpose and Argument

This dissertation is based on the premise that we must investigate both the socio-economic and cultural roots of the Caracazo, while affording currents of popular political action a role as an independent factor in Venezuela’s political equation. The local perspective that informs this dissertation breaks from dominant narratives focused on parties, trade union organizations or a primarily middle-class civil society that emerged in the 1970s. It no longer assumes the cooptation of popular sectors during the Fourth Republic, nor does it see the 1989 Caracazo as an eruption of the poor and their subsequent politicization under Chávez as a sudden “awakening.” Instead, it argues that the 23 de enero neighborhood constituted an actively politicized sector of the urban population by 1) producing and maintaining a plurality of collective political representations and identities that went beyond the confines of party lines; 2) creatively shaping organizing mechanisms, borrowed from parties’ incursion into popular settings, to fit particular community needs; 3) asserting power as a growing population whose expanding needs and votes allowed them to make demands upon the state; and 4) contesting the boundaries of formal politics in order to achieve meaningful political integration into an imagined nation.

These hypotheses point to a political consciousness that gestated independently from, though not in opposition to, the hallmark institutions of Venezuela’s polity –

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political parties, trade unions, and civil society— which struggled to identify and attend to the needs of a growing urban population whose poverty remained hidden during the years of rapid economic growth associated with the 1970s oil booms. Deteriorating living standards and the limited opportunities of an already industrially-saturated Caracas only accelerated the development of an independent political consciousness through what labor historian Steve Ellner has described as the “astronomical growth of the informal economy and micro businesses, whose members are not easily organized into unions nor autonomous organizations of civil society.”

My concern for historicizing this progressive marginalization of urban popular sectors also lays at the heart of an emerging literature on Latin American informality—economic and political— that designates an urban population involved in non-regulated labor, and which by some estimates constitute over half of the regional work force. Labor historian John French acknowledges efforts to formalize “a social science vocabulary … that distinguishes the formal and informal sectors,” while lamenting that such definitions lack “historical depth” with “labor historians no more likely today, than in the past, to take up the study of the secondary, informal, and tertiary sectors.”


While labor studies have only begun to grapple with the role, place, and significance of an informal reality that transcends rigid frameworks of trade unionism, the political parameters of informality have been clarified by recent advances in radical social theory. In *Empire* Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri offer the concept of the “multitude” as a diffuse social actor marked essentially by its existence outside of the state structure. The multitude, they assert, exists in contrast to the politically pliable and ostensibly homogenous constitution characteristic of the “masses,” precisely because “the multitude is a multiplicity, a plane of singularities” that tends toward heterogeneity, and thus resists co-optation and has the potential to form the backbone of a political body.\(^{57}\)

What is promising about this formulation is that it makes the state a reactive element, always anticipating and thus giving agency to the “multitude.” By privileging the popular underpinnings of political elements outside of the state structure, the concept of the “multitude” enriches the study of Venezuela’s Fourth Republic. In this sense, my project provides an empirical foundation to a still inchoate though potentially far-reaching theoretical formulation to examine the shifting contours of contemporary Latin America.

Precisely due to its novelty, the multitude stands at a conceptual crossroads. The Venezuelan case well illustrates the dimensions of this junction. On 11 April 2002, a failed civil-military coup attempted to oust a once widely popular President Hugo Chávez, elected by wide margin in 1998. The April coup pitted organized business groups, trade unions, and a largely middle class civil society against urban popular sectors that made up the core of Chavez supporters. For almost 72 hours Chávez was held

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under arrest and an interim president sworn in from the ranks of the business elite with U.S. support. But in a dramatic turn of events, a multitude including tens of thousands of neighborhood residents, surrounded the presidential palace located a short distance away and the Caracas military barracks, forcing Chávez’s reinstatement. For a third time in its history, currents of popular political consciousness in the neighborhood proved crucial to determining the course of society in Venezuela. Scholars of the Latin American multitude used the prominence of Venezuela’s case to link popular insurgencies associated with the crisis of neoliberalism throughout the region, in particular Peru, Argentina, and Bolivia.\(^\text{58}\) Jon Beasley-Murray’s chronicle of the events highlighted the “self-imposed blackout” by Venezuela’s major print and visual media outlets, privately owned and operated by the nation’s traditional elite. In the face of Chávez’s brief ouster, this media failed to cover the popular reaction that was unfolding against the new authorities, in an attempt, Beasley-Murray argues, to lend an aura of normalcy and finality to the coup. That the interim regime failed to anticipate the reaction of the multitude laid bare the extent to which their assumptions about the lack of popular political consciousness rested on the same notions of the urban popular sectors’ passivity and lack of autonomy that underlay the Fourth Republic. Having detained the leader of their movement, popular sectors would be incapable of acting independently. In this context, Beasley-Murray casts their eventual autonomous insurgence as positive proof that current conceptualizations of the multitude, which rest on an oppositional

relationship between “the people” –predictable and “prepared for sovereignty”— and the ungovernable “multitude,” are valid.

Yet seen from a historical perspective, the Venezuelan case may provide a challenge, not a validation, to these prevailing interpretations of the multitude that find in Chávez supporters a stark example of an autonomous body politic that resists co-optation, even –or especially, as Beasley-Murray argues– by Chávez himself, because of the multiplicity of identities by which it is comprised. The power of Venezuela’s multitude made its official debut through the Caracazo only to go unmemorialized in dominant historical narratives. In 1992, then-Army Commander Hugo Chávez challenged the memorialization process in an abortive coup, the first attempt to overthrow a democratically elected government in over thirty years. In interviews following his pardon and release, Chavez would characterize the Caracazo as both the “strategic” and “emotional” turning point in his shift of loyalty from “the government” to “the people.” Simultaneously casting himself as a messianic redeemer of Venezuela’s downtrodden, a member of the popular classes by virtue of his dark skin color, and the embodiment of a new political order as the presidential candidate of those victimized by the state in the Caracazo, Chavez sought to situate the exercise of popular political consciousness atop the political hierarchy. In this context, the possibility that Chávez’s rise to the presidency –first in a wave of electoral support, then in a wave of direct action by his supporters– constitutes the consolidation of a multitude with an independent and unpredictable will cannot be so quickly asserted in a historical vacuum. As Venezuelan social critic Jose

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59 Hardt and Negri, Empire, 103.
Antonio Hernández more cautiously observes in his own analysis of the April coup and the popular uprising that ended it: “The problem, of course, remains how to think of the multitude outside the apparatus of the state, how to think of that un-representable mass that contains … the fragile promise of absolute democracy.”

By providing a historical foundation for the emergence of the multitude in Venezuela, this project may begin to resolve that problematic.

**Sources and Method**

This study draws on a research design that views archival, ethnographic, and oral history sources as complementary. Historians of modern Latin America have been increasingly willing to use participant-observation and oral history to analyze individual and collective responses to changes in social and political life. The sources that anchor this dissertation were collected during three separate stages of research. The first took place in May 2002. It consisted of a systematic search of five daily newspapers and weekly magazines between 1 January and 31 March 1989, yielding 376 articles on the *Caracazo*, its immediate causes and aftermath. The second stage took place between March and June 2004, and examined minutes, internal reviews, and period trade publications from the former Banco Obrero, now the Ministerio del Poder Popular para la

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Vivienda y Hábitat, as they related to the construction and adjudication of apartments in the 23 de enero neighborhood, then the 2 de diciembre.

The third and longest stage of research, between August 2004 and October 2005, consisted of both archival data collection and oral history interviews with residents of the 23 de enero. The bulk of archival research conducted during this period encompassed a systematic review of newspapers from 1958 to 1989. In particular, the Ultimas Noticias national daily served as a baseline source; when events featuring the 23 de enero captured headlines, research expanded to include the El Nacional and El Universal dailies. The systematic review of newspapers also covered the weekly Tribuna Popular publication from the Communist Party, between 1958 and its illegalization in 1962, and after its legalization in 1969 until 1972. For the period of the 1980s, the search also included the capital city daily Diario de Caracas, then in circulation. Finally the study benefits from sources culled in May 2005 among the files of the Caracazo case, ruled on in 1999 by the Inter American Court of Human Rights and housed at the Court’s San José, Costa Rica headquarters.

The bulk of interviews were conducted between March and October 2005, when the author rented a room in the Barrio Sucre sector of the neighborhood. Living in the 23 de enero made possible drawing upon the archival research already conducted to guide the oral histories, especially by developing a rapport with community organizations which then provided a platform to introduce the research project to members and solicit volunteers for interviews. As such, the sample for the interviews was developed through the use of snowballing technique, beginning with members of the Asociación Civil
Antonio José de Sucre which brings together representatives from neighbors’ associations from throughout the 23 de enero. The group meets every Monday evening in the Diego de Lozada elementary school in Monte Piedad. All respondents were adults ranging in age from 18 to around 80. On volunteering to be interviewed, respondents were offered copies of an abbreviated, four page version of the dissertation prospectus in Spanish with contact information for the author. Interview locations were selected by the respondent and during times of their convenience.

All respondents were asked three baseline questions around watershed episodes in the neighborhood’s history: how and when did they come to reside in the neighborhood? If alive at the time, how did they remember the events of 23 January 1958? What where their experiences during the Caracazo? In more general terms interviewees were asked about their experiences with community involvement – political, cultural, or a combination. All told, the eventual interview sample grew to 78 residents, with at least one respondent from every sector of the 23 de enero. Most respondents were grouped in La Cañada and Monte Piedad (see Map 1), the neighborhood’s oldest sectors.

As stipulated in Duke University IRB protocols, oral consent was included as part of the interviews, reiterating the author’s affiliation, the purpose and parameters of the research project, and the possibility that parts of the interview might be included as sources in the study. When subjects turned to participation in once controversial protest and political activity, interviewees were reminded that they could chose to volunteer only the information with which they felt comfortable. Most interviews lasted an hour, and a dozen respondents were interviewed up to three times in separate sessions. Likewise,
there were five group interviews comprised of between four and twelve respondents. Following each interview, respondents were offered records of the session, either as transcripts, CD recordings, or both, and feedback was solicited.

Research for this study took place in a climate of intense political polarization, following efforts to unseat the Chávez government that included a failed coup in April 2002, an unprecedented oil industry strike between December 2002 and January 2003, and a bitterly fought recall referendum in August 2004. It was precisely at this extraordinary moment, when daily discourses lay saturated with competing memorializations of history both recent and distant, that a grassroots study could most inform about the development of popular politics in Venezuela through the use of a theoretical framework that takes seriously plural forms of political representations and identities.

**Structure and Focus**

Five chapters comprise this dissertation. They revolve around three episodes in the history of the neighborhood, each one revelatory of the ways in which Venezuela’s state and residents of the neighborhood named after the founding date of both dictatorship and democracy responded relationally to critical moments in the nation’s political evolution in the last half century. As such the focus of this dissertation is very particular. It neither argues nor claims that the neighborhood under study, built as the 2 de diciembre but soon thereafter acquiring the name by which it has existed ever since, 23 de enero, is representative of the experience of Venezuelan popular sectors writ large. Indeed recent work on Venezuelan popular sectors, spurred by similar questions raised
here but focusing on other areas of Caracas, suggests that while important overlaps exist in the way popular sectors negotiated their participation in the political system that followed in the wake of democratic revolution in 1958, other elements remain particular to the spatial, demographic, and symbolic dimensions of the 23 de enero. Neither does the dissertation attempt to chronicle the life and times of the neighborhood and its residents. While detailed accounts of the episodes under study are the basis of the respective chapters, the intervening moments remain contextualized in broad strokes rather than in day by day narrations. The purpose here is not to downplay process, but rather to highlight those events where the intersection between state and residents of the neighborhood are most sharply set in relief. Finally, though the dissertation addresses the neighborhood’s diverse internal configuration, it does so in part to argue that its original design goal of homogenizing urban space and life in fact provided the setting for an explosion of heterogeneity. Accordingly, this dissertation does not aim to suggest that the history narrated below captures the full range of diversity – in either political expression or organizing traditions – present in the neighborhood.

Instead, the three episodes that anchor this dissertation reflect representative moments, modalities, and conjunctures critical to understanding larger phenomena shaping the relationship between Venezuela’s government and its citizens in this symbolically charged and spatially strategic neighborhood. They capture overarching

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62 Studying organizing traditions since 1958 in the La Vega and San Agustín barrios of Caracas, Sujatha Fernandes has found that the periodization outlined in chapter three of this dissertation – namely a 1960s era of political but unpopular radical organizing, and a 1970s era of popular but nominally apolitical organizing around community grievances – similarly played out in these areas. However, far stronger cultural agency rooted around afro-Venezuelan identity and liberation theology shaped organizing traditions in these sectors. Sujatha Fernandes, *In the Spirit of Negro Primero: Urban Social Movements in Chávez’s Venezuela* (Durham: Duke University Press, Forthcoming).
patterns identified in the course of analyzing the archival and interview materials that comprise the bulk of sources on which this dissertation rests. Finally, they focus on well examined periods in Venezuelan history which, when reset against the backdrop of popular organizing and mobilization and its relationship to state actors and actions, lay bare a more nuanced picture of the ways in which popular sectors came to understand the promises and shortcomings of Venezuela’s electoral democratic system.

In this vein, chapters one and two revisit Venezuela’s transition to democracy, focusing on the year 1958. In the weeks and months both preceding and following the 23 January 1958 revolution that overthrew Marcos Pérez Jiménez’s dictatorship and eventually ushered in the multi-party electoral democracy for which Venezuelan political elites would gain admiration, exactly what direction that democracy would take remained far from certain. The resulting conflicts have primarily been cast as inter partisan affairs, revolving around pre-existing elite level accords and their eventual “agreement to make pacts,” as anthropologist Fernando Coronil writes. In the process, popular sectors emerge as little more than spectators in a political drama unfolding before their eyes. Yet as the two chapters argue, Venezuela’s urban working classes in Caracas had emerged from the preceding decade of modernization, urban growth, and concentration of power in the capital well alert of their newfound significance as a key constituency, particularly in a context billed as an electoral democracy. Against this backdrop, and additionally imbued with symbolic capital, the 23 de enero and its residents exercised their constituent power by mobilizing either in support or opposition to government agendas in an effort to

63 Coronil, The Magical State, 229.
help configure the contours of the infant democracy. In part, the neighborhood’s
centrality in the struggles over what shape democracy would take reflected its symbolic
weight, itself the product of Pérez Jiménez’s own efforts to cast the neighborhood as an
example of his modernizing agenda. As such the rise of the neighborhood as a central
front in Venezuelan political history is the subject of chapter one, tracing its unexpected
evolution from a symbol of Pérez Jiménez’s dictatorship to a symbol of the democratic
revolution that secured his ouster. Chapter two then considers in detail the ways in
which, following Pérez Jiménez’s ouster, residents of the neighborhood further cemented
their position as standard bearers of the new political order, while also at times deploying
their symbolic capital to shape the emerging political order for their benefit. Ultimately,
it argues that their support of the electoral system, but their rejection of the parties that
would eventually trade power, prefigured patterns of loyalty and legitimate disloyalty to
the democratic system that would play out over the next thirty years.

Chapters three and four address the second episode. Where chapters one and two
considered democracy’s founding moments against the backdrop of efforts by residents
of the 23 de enero to shape the direction of the new political system, chapters three and
four consider the first moments of systemic crisis following democracy’s consolidation.
In particular, they focus on a series of hijackings of public service vehicles between 1981
and 1982 in the 23 de enero. It was the first such collective action in the neighborhood’s
history. It also took place just prior to what mainstream scholarship on Venezuela has
identified as the moment when democracy began to fade, in a formula best expressed by
political scientist Jennifer McCoy: “We date the visible beginning of the decline of Punto
Fijo democracy to an economic event: Black Friday, February 18, 1983, when the currency was devalued for the first time in two decades.”64 The hijackings disrupt this assessment and periodization three-fold: they alert us to the conflicts taking place between the state and its citizens before the onset of economic crisis, and shed light on how each was experimenting with new repertories of action ahead of a period of coming crisis; they suggest that deepening, rather than a decline, of electoral democracy was the way in which residents of the 23 de enero envisaged in this moment, which they cast as one of opportunity to recalibrate democracy in order to make it more accountable to the electorate; and they suggest that reducing explanations about the collapse of a decades-old political system to a causal “economic event” belies local traditions of alternately challenging and seeking inclusion into Venezuela’s political system spanning decades, traditions on which residents of the 23 de enero would rely to shape responses to contracting economic cycles.

Accordingly, chapter three provides the context for the hijackings. It identifies the overarching strands of local organizing in the wake of the transition to electoral democracy covered in chapter two. During the 1960s, residents of a neighborhood ironically named after democracy’s founding date experienced intense repression as radical sectors feeling betrayed by the moderate pace of reform that followed from the revolution of 1958 unleashed an urban guerilla war against Venezuela’s democratic government. Focused primarily on seizing state power, urban guerrillas proved ill

equipped to garner popular support among a population whose needs in an aging housing complex grew more pressing every day. By the 1970s, the military defeat of Venezuela’s guerrilla movement gave way to a period of community organizing around local needs and demands that, while widespread, proved unable to secure attention and improvements from the state. Throughout, residents of the 23 de enero continued to exercise their right to vote despite again and again opting for losing candidates. The hijackings, which are the focus of chapter four, capture the moment when these strands converged. It argues that the interplay of radical tactics forged in the fray of unpopular guerrilla war in the 1960s and passed down to a younger generation of activists, a locally oriented ethos that marked the 1970s era of organizing around community needs, and a new discourse and practice of electoral accountability developed as key figures in Venezuela’s government attempted to reform from within, gave rise to a distinctly urban, distinctly popular form of political consciousness that redefined the boundaries of legitimate collective action.

The final two chapters are built around the Caracazo massacre and its consequences for Venezuelan politics and history. To be sure, no shortage of similarly aimed analyses exists. As early as 1989, months after the massacre, historian Steve Ellner had already identified the Caracazo as marking more than a social explosion, but rather as a major break in prevailing narratives of Venezuelan history, in a fittingly titled essay “Venezuela: No Exception.”⁶⁵ Over the years, the Caracazo has again and again surfaced as a turning point in Venezuelan history, marking an obligatory reference

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pointing to the inability of elites to anticipate and then, adequately to respond, to mounting crises of their own making. And yet, while the Caracazo remains a recurrent theme in much revisionist history, it is also true that it has been only infrequently studied independently. Instead, chapter five narrows the scope of studies on the Caracazo. Rather than using the event to make broader claims about Venezuelan elites, it follows the pattern of the dissertation as a whole and instead offers a detailed local history of the events as they unfolded in the 23 de enero. To do so it uses hitherto untapped sources from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in San José, which accepted a case against the state brought forth by family members of four dozen victims of the Caracazo, and in 1999 ruled that the state had indeed perpetrated massacre. This approach sets in relief that while Venezuela’s state may have been surprised at the response of urban popular sectors it could no longer claim to understand, these sectors too, were surprised by the response of a state that they no longer could claim was representative.

The dissertation concludes by offering an initial assessment of the ways in which a newly emergent narrative of revolution under the presidency of Hugo Chávez has memorialized the Caracazo. It suggests that much in the way Venezuelan political elites before Hugo Chávez marginalized histories of local organizing and mobilization to their detriment, chavista narratives that uphold the Caracazo as the beginning of an era of popular political awakening follow in the same tradition. As a result, the 23 de enero has once again emerged as a hotbed of both latent and overt forms of dissent to the project Bolivarian Revolution despite generalized support for its underlying promises of greater

66 Coronil and Skurski, "Dismembering and Remembering the Nation."
participation in the conduct of decision making. Understanding that what Sujatha Fernandes has called “critical social movements”\[^{67}\] alternately supporting Chávez in the ballot box but rejecting his efforts at cooptation, lies in legacies of political action neither beholden to nor opposed to Venezuela’s state, is the final aim of this dissertation.

Chapter One

From 2 de diciembre to 23 de enero: Authoritarian Modernism, Popular Ambivalence, and Symbolic Space in the Dictator’s Superblocks

On 2 December 1955 Marcos Pérez Jiménez inaugurated Venezuela’s largest public housing project in downtown Caracas.¹ In its first phase it consisted of thirty five rectangular monoliths, eleven of them as high as fifteen stories, built to accommodate fifteen thousand residents.² By 1957 the finished project encompassed 78 buildings, including 38 fifteen-story “superblocks,” capable of housing 100 thousand, or twelve percent of the working class population of Caracas.³ But beyond people the blocks also housed the promise of Pérez Jiménez’s New National Ideal, his vision of a modern republic quite literally built on the foundations of massive public works projects.⁴ In naming them 2 de diciembre, the 1952 birth date of his dictatorship, Pérez Jiménez confirmed what their unparalleled dimensions suggested: the superblocks were the


“material expression” of perezimenismo; their working class inhabitants symbols of its popular foundations.

Towards Authoritarian Modernism in the New Urban Venezuela

The roots of authoritarian modernism in Venezuela lay in 1948, when Pérez Jiménez and a cadre of mid-level military officers ended a brief post-war democratic regime. They had come to rule over a rapidly urbanizing country in the midst of an oil boom. The seeds of this boom were planted in the mid 1910s as a handful of wells sprouted in the northwestern plains, where petroleum seeped freely from the ground. Yet these were tentative steps. In the first decade of Juan Vicente Gómez’s iron-fisted dictatorship (installed in a 1908 bloodless coup and lasting until Gómez’s death in 1935) Venezuela’s economy remained tied to the fortunes of a coffee crop that emerged in the 1830s as a reliable if financially lackluster staple export. Gómez’s own power base hailed from Venezuela’s coffee-rich southwestern Andes, inhibiting any serious changes to national economic policy. But the post-war economic boom and the burgeoning prominence of internal combustion engines in the North Atlantic created a demand for oil that Gómez shrewdly exploited in negotiating land concessions and leases with British and North American corporations. By 1928, oil exports had tripled the combined worth of all other exports, exploding from an annual production of 490,000 barrels in 1920, to

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5 López Villa, "La Arquitectura Del 2 De Diciembre," 172.

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140 million a decade later. To mollify his base among coffee planting elites, Gómez distributed revenues from concessions and rents through lucrative bribes; to check challenges from regions poorly favored under his “patriarchal autocracy,” Gómez professionalized, modernized, and expanded the military, constructed Venezuela’s first inter-regional road system, dispersed trusted Andean lieutenants throughout the national territory, and made fast use of a vast network of spies that infiltrated all sectors of social life. 

In this context, Gomez relocated Venezuela’s capital 60 miles west of Caracas in 1914. The move constituted as much a personal choice born of an antagonistic relationship with the Caracas elite – whom he regarded as a nuisance rather than a threat to his rule – as it did a tactical move meant to subvert Caracas’s economic and political

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primacy through a policy of concerted neglect. Distrust for Caracas and its elites laid bare deeper misgivings about urban life and urbanization more generally, which Gómez viewed as "potentially revolutionary." Yet during the 1920s, Caracas grew in both political salience and size, an unintended consequence of the shift toward an oil-based economy. As development of oil supplanted investment in the coffee industry, economic depression befell traditional coffee producing regions, manifesting itself in peasant migration towards Venezuela’s urban hub. As the nation’s largest city, Caracas remained the preferred destination for oil executives and was the site for an emerging administrative complex linked to the new industry, fast sprouting urban service sector demands that rural migrants sought to fill. In turn, from 1920 to 1930 Caracas’s population nearly doubled, from 92,000 to about 175,000 residents, and to 260,000 by the time of Gómez’s death in 1935. Against this backdrop, and Gómez’s fears

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9 Almandoz, "Transfer of Urban Ideas," 82.


notwithstanding, the 1920s emerged as the dawn of “Venezuela’s great urban revolution.”

Yet urban historians point out that despite efforts at institutionalizing city planning in the interwar years – expressed notably in the 1938 founding of the Caracas Dirección de Urbanismo (Urbanism Directorate) and the 1939 development of a Plan Monumental de Caracas (Monumental Caracas Plan) – early urbanization in Venezuela was rather a rudderless revolution. Consensus about Caracas’s primacy surfaced immediately following Gómez’s death. His successors did not share Gomez’s tepidness regarding urbanization, instead seeking to exploit the capital’s strategic “proximity to the centers of the civilized world” vis-à-vis other would-be South American competitors, namely Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Buenos Aires far to the south, Lima in the Pacific coast, and Bogotá far inland. Yet they also did not share Gómez’s military and political power, ensuring that the shape of Caracas’s urbanization would be debated rather than imposed. Traditional elites – committed Francophiles since late nineteenth century efforts to remake Caracas into a tropical Paris – argued for an aesthetic, ornate city to mirror the French capital’s grandeur, a possibility now made feasible by the windfall of oil revenue. Their vision contemplated broad, tree-lined boulevards linking multiple city centers where residential and commercial life could coexist. For its part the city’s emerging middle class, comprised of oil industry technocrats and engineers who

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12 Quoted in Greenfield, “Venezuela,” 490.
13 Almandoz, “Transfer of Urban Ideas,” 80, 89.
identified with British and North American utilitarian planning methods, emphasized the need to create a sense of urban discipline along axes of work, leisure, and sanitation with a strong and unmistakable business hub. By the mid 1940s, though migration to Caracas continued unabated and would soon experience a dramatic post-war boom, an official consensus on the direction of Caracas’s growth remained elusive. Elites and middle classes abandoned an increasingly chaotic city center – characterized by narrow colonial-era streets, ever-growing squatter settlements, and lack of sanitation – to its fate, instead relocating eastward to occupy verdant sites of old coffee estates.\footnote{Ibid.: 93.}

Unplanned densification of the urban center thus coupled with a progressively prominent segregation of the city grid to mark the state of human and political geography in mid-century Caracas. Between 1945 and 1948, a short-lived democratic government whose popular foundations lay with the provincial peasantry further contributed to Caracas’s frenzied growth. Acción Democrática (Democratic Action, AD) leaders had cut their political teeth under Gómez’s regime, decrying as treasonous both the dictator’s self-interested concessions of Venezuelan subsoil, and the state’s failure to distribute oil wealth across varied economic sectors. By contrast AD leaders sought to “sow the oil” nationally, diverting already limited funds away from urbanization and towards the countryside in an effort to diversify the Venezuelan economy by jumpstarting long abandoned agricultural sectors.\footnote{Rómulo Betancourt, Venezuela, Política Y Petróleo (Caracas: Monte Avila Editores, 2001 [1956]), 345-68, 81-404.} Meanwhile post-war migration flows to and within
Venezuela continued to place strains on urban centers nationwide, but principally in Caracas, where by 1950 the population had risen to nearly 700,000. The AD government’s diffidence in the face of urban popular sectors’ growing prominence in Venezuelan political life contributed to its overthrow for want of popular support in 1948, and exposed the extent to which urbanity had come significantly to shape the direction of national political development.

**From Battle to War: Symbolic Space and Popular Ambivalence in the Superblocks**

For Pérez Jiménez, the primacy of establishing a base of support among urban sectors was a lesson well-understood, and one he sought to exploit, especially following a 1952 bloodless coup in which he consolidated his individual power over a previously Junta-based regime. Revisiting 1930s planning debates centered on Caracas, Pérez Jiménez readily favored functionalist schemes that promised to urbanize discipline among proletarian sectors in a capital whose rapid growth he embraced as a sign of progress and modernity. Rural migration flows going back to the mid-20s, coupled with grandly conceived but poorly implemented urbanization policies in the 30s and 40s, contrived by 1950 to generate over 28,000 “miserable ranchos” in and around Caracas hillsides, “generally [consisting of] one cardboard-walled room, wooden planks and a

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16 Greenfield, "Venezuela," 492.

zinc roof.” The figure represented 25 percent of Caracas households. It also marked a two-fold increase from just nine years previous. But more importantly for the dictatorship, according to its principal urbanist Carlos Raúl Villanueva, was that the proliferation of ranchos “in the face of Caracas’s steady growth, seemed like an implacable indictment.” Indeed, “housing construction in these sectors [had] been completely anarchic and in many cases clandestine,” amounting to an imminent “threat” against “society,” “the individual,” and the “aesthetic” integrity of all public works projects planned for Caracas within the soon to emerge New National Ideal. In order to score “another conquest in the state’s program of social action in favor of the least favored classes,” according to Villanueva, ranchos “had to disappear.”

And they did, in a “battle against ranchos” officially announced in 1951, but rooted in the first days of the Junta-based dictatorship installed in 1948 as Martin Frechilla has shown. In what became the 2 de diciembre alone, Pérez Jiménez

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21 Villanueva and Cepero, La Vivienda Popular En Venezuela, 115.


consigned ten *barrios* for demolition covering an area roughly 1.5 square kilometers, making use of a 1947 law enabling expropriation “in areas considered essential for the security or defense of the Nation.”

Beyond a campaign to conquer physical space, the battle against ranchos was also one for the hearts and minds of Venezuelans living in a state of mental “misery, sorrow, and abandon” resulting in “promiscuity.” This additional “threat” against “morals, health, and safety” constituted a social challenge to the New National Ideal even above aesthetics. Promotional pamphlets stressed “modesty,” “sobriety,” “hygiene,” and “good taste” as the underlying social aims of *rancho* eradication. Recurrent images of children admiring “the new world” – while pointing gleefully at superblocks rising where ranchos once stood – expressed the poignant hope that integrated “housing solutions” like the 2 de diciembre would provide social education as well as shelter in a context

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“capable of promoting collective encounters and fostering community and civic values.”

Academic publications also showed optimism that the new housing projects would aid with social planning in Venezuela by promoting the reduction of dweller per household figures which, they were quick to point out, in 1955 “surpassed traditionally overpopulated countries like India and Japan.”

Expressed in military terms, the dictatorship’s discourse vis-à-vis housing in general, and the 2 de diciembre in particular as the most visible front in its self-styled battle, had three consequences beyond the stated aim of “rationally transforming the physical environment and improving the moral, intellectual, and material conditions of the nation’s inhabitants.”

First, it conferred upon the state exclusive stewardship of popular sectors’ needs, waging a battle in their name but markedly not with their input. In stressing again and again the material, mental, and civic shortcomings of Venezuela’s “least favored classes,” the state on one hand denied that meaningful contributions could emerge autonomously from within the ranks of popular sectors. On the other hand, it rejected a priori that material hardship could spur rather than prevent collective identity formation. In the long term the assumptions underlying both statements proved false, fostering instead a climate of resentment in the face of hasty expropriations and forced relocations that was at the root of perezjimenismo’s rejection by 2 de diciembre residents.

López Villa, "La Arquitectura Del 2 De Diciembre," 170.

What is striking here is that in January 1954, a panel commissioned by Pérez Jiménez to evaluate living conditions in *barrios* scheduled for demolition warned precisely about the “risky generalizations” that typified official discourse on *ranchos*, their inhabitants, and the communities they indeed forged. Nevertheless, by year’s end work on what became the 2 de diciembre was underway with the demolition of the very areas the study assessed.

In looking past the warnings of his own commission, Pérez Jiménez laid bare a second function of martial discourse: it reduced the nature of the housing problem to its most basic expression, stressing quick and functional solutions regardless of cost or sacrifice. Warning against risky generalizations, the 1954 commission report made special mention of the hackneyed *rancho* as a problematic simplification:

> Ordinarily one speaks of the *rancho*, a denomination with which housing along creeks and *cerros* is characterized … [but] it is necessary to make a distinction between individual houses, and housing when considered as part of a neighborhood … This appreciation leads us to conclude that not all housing in *cerros* can be considered *ranchos*. It is true that among those seen as good *[housing]* some *[hygienic and structural]* conditions are absent, but this does not preclude them from being categorized in a class above *ranchos*.

Yet nuance was not a luxury of a state in battle. Demolition teams made no distinction between *ranchos* and “well-constituted and traditional” *barrios* like those razed to build

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32 n.s., "El Problema De Los Cerros."


34 n.s., "El Problema De Los Cerros."
the 2 de diciembre.\(^{35}\) Within a militarist discourse, homogenizing the problem served a strategic purpose: it made possible finding homogenous solutions that could be implemented quickly and prominently to effect a decisive victory. The superblocks well fit these needs. Located within sight of the presidential palace, defense ministry, and Congress, the blocks formed a symbolic axis reflecting Pérez Jiménez’s control over society’s principal elements. Introduced in 1951, in concept the blocks consisted of free-standing Unidades Vecinales equipped with terraced duplex apartments, rooftop walkways and greeneries, and collective services at both roof level and on the first floor.\(^{36}\) The 2 de diciembre superblocks lost all of these features for the sake of higher occupancy and mass production. “Twelve hour shifts, day and night even on Saturdays”\(^{37}\) made possible building one 15-story, 150-apartment superblock for up to 1500 people in as little as 42 days.\(^{38}\) New nomenclature also reflected the pressures of an embattled regime: from the neighborly Unidad Vecinal, the 2 de diciembre became an Unidad Residencial.\(^{39}\) It was functionalist architecture at the service of functionalist

\(^{35}\) López Villa, “La Arquitectura Del 2 De Diciembre,” 169. López Villa describes how of the ten barrios the 2 de diciembre replaced, three were founded in the late 19\(^\text{th}\) century, one in the 1920s (its landowner directed the urbanization process therein, depicted in Fig. 1), one in the early 1930s (again through an urbanization process directed by its landowner), and three later that decade.


\(^{39}\) Ibid., 171.
political ideology. “Community” in this context was reduced to a circumscribed existence in “civic centers,” two for 100,000 residents.40

The dictatorship’s swift and uncompromising attacks on ranchos, when coupled with a contradictory rhetoric of compassion and disregard for the social actors whose desires it presumed to represent, set the stage for a critical third consequence of militarist discourse: it established a matrix of confrontation that closed off dialogue with the state, thus channeling even mild discord towards one only option of resistance. From 1954 to 1957, expropriations and adjudications constituted the primary sources of resentment towards the state. Work on the 2 de diciembre took place in six-month cycles. From December to May construction slowed almost to standstill before commencing again at breakneck speed around June.41 On one hand this peculiar practice made possible, indeed necessary, record-setting rates of construction. On the other hand, it meant that all work – from evictions, to temporary relocation, to leveling, to construction, to adjudication of new housing – took place simultaneously. The resulting bottlenecks in expropriations and adjudications were a tinder box of bitterness, as many forced from their homes in June were further forced to wait months beyond December to return to “paradise lost,”42 even as new apartments sat vacant. Crests and troughs in the rate of expropriations attest to the model’s cyclical nature (see Graph 1), while a similar pattern can be gleaned from

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40 de Blay, 30 Años De Banco Obrero, 150-53, López Villa, "La Arquitectura Del 2 De Diciembre," 170. Plans called for one civic center per phase, but due to pressures in the delivery schedule, the “civic center” for the first phase was left unbuilt.


42 López Villa, "La Arquitectura Del 2 De Diciembre," 169.
the number of grievances addressed to the adjudicating entity, the Workers’ Bank. In the fourth trimester of 1957, so as to accommodate the third, final, and largest phase of the 2 de diciembre, expropriations spiked 500 percent, marking an unprecedented rise that translated into unparalleled social frustration.

In turn, residents forced to move to the 2 de diciembre development faced their relocation in various ways. For some, especially recent arrivals to Caracas, the move represented as Pérez Jiménez had intended, a marked improvement over their standards of living. For others, primarily among those who witnessed their long time communities razed to make way for densely packed superblocks, forcible relocation generated predictable discontent. In both cases, the common thread was shared experiences of community life forged around both clandestine political activity and collective actions seeking revendications in their barrios. The case of Tiro al Blanco (Target Practice) is instructive. In early 1956 Tiro al Blanco, a squatter community bordering the Avila mountain range in north-central Caracas, became the first neighborhood razed to relocate its residents to the just completed 2 de diciembre. Juan Martinez was then in his twenties, a father of three. He had arrived in Caracas as a child in 1935 following the overthrow of Juan Vicente Gómez. Living with family until his marriage in 1948, he settled with his new bride in the Tiro al Blanco sector where a rash of new constructions was underway. When in October 1948 the military overthrew Venezuela’s first

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democratically elected president Rómulo Gallegos after just eight months in office, uncertainty about the fate of popular expression settled in. Still, Martinez recalls, the community managed to publish a bi-weekly circular, billing itself as the “organ of the barrio.” In its inaugural issue on 30 April 1949 (see Figure 3), *Laberinto* printed on its front page what would become a standard feature, a description of the community’s basic needs, water constituting an early lack. Other sections included a serial murder-mystery novel, a “literary segment” featuring poetry, birthday announcements, and a “muchachas del barrio” (young women of the barrio) feature showcasing an interview with a local female youth. In another issue, this one from 14 May 1949 (see Figure 3), *Laberinto* illustrated the associative networks that underlay community activism in urban popular sectors later forced to relocate to the superblocks, devoting its entire front page to explaining in detail the ways in which the community had come together to provide water for its residents by constituting water brigades involving area youth, women, and men. This camaraderie and its attendant organizing networks persisted and at times grew stronger in the 2 de diciembre, as entire blocks from *Tiro al Blanco* were moved en masse, often to the same building, sometimes to the same floor, as was the case with Juan Martinez and his family who ended up in Block 4 of Monte Piedad, across the way from their neighbors in *Tiro al Blanco*.44

This simmering frustration in late 1957 coincided with mounting pressures from both military and civilian sectors for Pérez Jiménez to resign. Yet by the time authorities

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44 Glen Martinez, Interview with author, 7 September 2005.
understood the unintended consequences of their hasty urbanization agenda there was little room for a selective response, leading instead to broad militarization of the neighborhood beginning in December 1957. Far from neutralizing clandestine political work, the government’s response worked to expand networks of solidarity among residents, fueling the kind of key urban support for the struggle for Venezuelan democracy that would prove vital in lending it popular legitimacy when it came in the form of a military coup on 23 January 1958. Within days, the 2 de diciembre “went from being a symbol of the dictatorship to a symbol of the democratic victory against it.” Wrote one newspaper, “The fury unleashed upon residents of that populous neighborhood,” alongside the final demise of Pérez Jiménez, “… gave rise to a proposal asking the Junta de Gobierno to change the name of the from 2 de diciembre to 23 de enero.” Renamed the 23 de enero, it would again honor both popular strength and the promise of a republican ideal, only this time at the service of a new liberal democratic order. And just as it had during the dictatorship, a tense interplay between conflict and support marked the state’s relationship with its namesake community.

Pérez Jiménez had achieved with the superblocks what he intended, to make them a symbol of his government, to make them a central part of his vision for Venezuela, a beacon of the promise of modernity. In doing so he had generated gratitude from some residents for whom moving from ranchos to superblocks represented a remarkable opportunity to gain respectability. But that very centrality, coupled with the repulsion of

many other residents far less pleased by their forced relocation, would transform the 2 de diciembre into a centerpiece not of Pérez Jiménez, but of the nation more broadly. As his government fell, the same symbolic and spatial centrality that had informed the superblocks’ construction would again take center stage.

From 2 de diciembre to 23 de enero

Inés Oliveira was seventeen the day Marcos Pérez Jiménez’s rule came to an end. A self-admitted “saltamonte,” she was among the thousands who took to the streets on 23 January 1958 after discovering Pérez Jiménez had fled Venezuela at dawn, bound for the Dominican Republic. His departure capped a volatile month that began with a failed coup attempt on New Year’s Day, several cabinet shuffles, an indefinite national strike on 21 January, and violent street clashes between state security forces and Caracas residents on 22 January. Finally on 23 January, a Junta comprised of young military officers formally seized power in the vacuum left by Pérez Jiménez’s departure. A ten year dictatorship was over.

On that morning, Inés recalls, she “was one of those who shouted, ran through the streets, and got on a truck and yelled ‘Down with the government!’ Down with the government!’” Inés’s enthusiasm was in part a release. In the preceding days the 2 de diciembre neighborhood, Pérez Jiménez’s emblematic community of tomorrow and

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46 In Venezuelan vernacular, saltamonte, or grasshopper, refers to overactive, carefree youth who escape parental control. The term borrows from the Aesopian fable “The Ant and the Grasshopper,” in which the former assiduously prepares for and comfortably survives winter, while the latter prefers instead to sing and play, and in turn suffers when the cold arrives.
where Inés and seven family members had lived since being relocated there in December 1956, was in a state of siege. “My mother forbade us from setting foot outside our apartment,” she recalled, where in a final show of force by the regime the streets below were “como monte, full of police disguised as military.” On 22 January Inés and friend Carlos Germán Rivas were at the plaza behind Block 14 to watch as a group of police assembled, when a shot rang out: “I’ll never forget it … my hand was covered in blood.” The bullet had hit Carlos in the right eye, knocking him unconscious and leading Inés to believe him dead.47 A crowd of fellow residents gathered around her. “That was a revolution … people were going to lynch [the policeman], tear his head off.” But the revolution came on 23 January, when Inés boarded a truck unbeknownst to her parents, shouted “Abajo el gobierno!” and proceeded to the downtown headquarters of Seguridad Nacional, Pérez Jiménez’s domestic security force. “We saw all manner of body parts there, heads, feet, breasts, penises.” It was the kind of scene that exposed an ultimately unsustainable relationship between prosperity under Pérez Jiménez and the price of absolute consent his government demanded in return. “With Pérez Jiménez there was no hunger,” Inés reflected decades later, “but there was pain in many homes.”48

Inés’s participation in the events of 23 January 1958 revealed the ambivalent relationship between Pérez Jiménez and residents of the superblocks he built as a symbol


48 Oliveira.
of his government’s vision for Venezuela, brought to light in chapter one. Indeed when
Inés and her family arrived in block 12 of the La Cañada sector of the 2 de diciembre,
they represented the very image of the impoverished urbanite, crammed into improvised
housing precariously hugging Caracas hillsides. Like so many others, they found
themselves leaving for their new home at night while bulldozers razed what remained of
their zinc-roofed rancho. For Inés and her family the move represented “a whole new
way of life… You woke up in the morning and everything was different.” Indeed, “That
for us was like a mansion. You know the conditions we poor people lived in? When we
learned we were to be moved, no one slept from the happiness, the joy of it all. No more
cockroaches, no more outhouses… My parents were ecstatic.” And despite the dust, the
tight quarters (eight people for two bedrooms), and the altitude that greeted them in their
new thirteenth floor apartment, Inés recalls, “that was so beautiful… If Pérez Jiménez
hadn’t left, well, if he hadn’t been overthrown, there would be no ranchos in Caracas,
because he dreamed of a beautiful Venezuela.” Still, when Pérez Jiménez fell, Inés was
on the front lines in demonstrations celebrating his ouster. Looking back, much of her
actions more aptly reflected the spontaneous impulse of a teen in the midst of history-
making events, than a considered commentary on the outgoing regime: “I didn’t know
much about politics,” she says, “but you get carried away in the moment.”

The complexities underlying Inés’s relationship to the outgoing government were
lost in memorializations that followed in the wake of the events of 23 January. Instead,

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49 Ibid.
press reports and a flurry of political figures returning from exile cast Inés and others who took to the streets that day as central players in a narrative of popular insurrection by a people tired of repression, no longer duped by ostentatious public works of the Pérez Jiménez regime, and ready to throw their support behind the promise of a democratic regime, however ill-defined that promise remained. In a radio address on 24 January Rear Admiral Wolfgang Larrazábal, President of the Junta that took power, expressed in the wake of Pérez Jiménez’s ouster: “The Junta de Gobierno, which has been constituted to lead the people of Venezuela in the organization of a constitutional and democratic Republic, has seen tolerantly and with sympathy, all the manifestations of joy through which the collectivity has condemned the vices of yesterday and their enthusiasm for the for the political and moral values that prefigure the future direction of the new government.”

On 9 February a crowd of thousands in Caracas greeted Rómulo Betancourt, leader of Acción Democrática, as he returned after nine years in exile: “I return to Venezuela … to work towards the stabilization of the democratic regime… The past revolution would not have been possible without a resistance begun [ten years ago], showing Venezuelans, whether in jail or in exile, that the passion for liberty was alive, exploding in magnificent fashion now.”

Years later, historian and diplomat Jose Luis Rivas Rivas, *Historia Gráfica De Venezuela: Una Historia Contada Por La Prensa* vol. 7 (Caracas: Centro Editor, 1980), 24.

Ibid., 60.
Salcedo-Bastardo would write of 23 January 1958: “[it] represented the victory of and for ordinary Venezuelans who rose up in unified rejection of tyranny.”

As symbols of Pérez Jiménez’s regime, the 2 de diciembre and its residents occupied a central front in that narrative. In what became the most emblematic image of 23 January 1958 (see Figure 6), a crowd congregates in the Avenida Urdaneta in front of the Miraflores Presidential Palace, out of view on the left of the photo. The Presidential Honor Guard barracks stand on the photo’s right edge. In the foreground, a contingent of insurgent tanks stand guard in front of the barracks, the crowd converging around them. Towering above all, four 2 de diciembre superblocks emerge as focal point. The photo revealed much about the promises of the revolution it captured: the interplay of tanks and crowds expressed hope for a partnership between popular and military factions; the notable omission of the Presidential Palace signaled a hoped for marginalization of executive power after years of dictatorial rule; and above all, the centrality of the superblocks reflected popular sectors’ backing of the revolution, and the centrality they thought they would exercise in the nascent political system.

In print media a similar focus on the 2 de diciembre emerged. Accounts of the events emphasized the repression to which residents of the superblocks were subjected by state authorities. Ordered to “shoot to kill,” Pérez Jiménez security forces conducted what the press readily called “a kind of massacre against the defenseless inhabitants” of

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53 Velasquez, ”Aspectos De La Evolución Política De Venezuela En El Último Medio Siglo,” 197.
the 2 de diciembre, whose residents “from the start,” according to El Universal, “demonstrated great strength and unflinching valor in the face of events.”

Reports of the “tragic balance” of the events likewise paid special mention to the neighborhood’s dead (see List of Dead). Of 93 fatalities recorded in Caracas between 11 January and 25 January directly attributable to the events surrounding Pérez Jiménez’s overthrow, 21 – including nine under the age of eighteen – died in the 2 de diciembre. Of those, seventeen died on 22 January alone. They included Aura Figueroa de Ferrer and her one year old child, gunned down as she peered out from her apartment in Block 5 of Monte Piedad. They also included José Rafael Gonzalez and Mauricio José Delgado, both of Block 22 in the Zona Central. It was Block 22 on top of which, due to its location overlooking Avenida Sucre, the Pérez Jiménez government had placed an enormous “New National Ideal” sign to reflect the ideology behind his modernizing vision for Venezuela. Yet on 22 January, that same visibility would make Block 22 the target of intense fire from police taking positions on the avenue below. And as Pérez Jiménez fled at dawn on 23 January, the brothers Luis and Douglas Leal, two and six years old respectively, died from gunshot wounds to the head and lung in Monte Piedad.

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54 “161 Muertos Y 477 Heridos Es El Balance Trágico De La Lucha Por La Libertad.”

55 “Murieron Trágicamente 93 Personas En Caracas,” El Nacional, 26 January 1958. The figure also included three soldiers and five Seguridad Nacional agents who died at the hands of lynch mobs on 24 and 25 January.

56 “161 Muertos Y 477 Heridos Es El Balance Trágico De La Lucha Por La Libertad.”


58 “Balance Trágico De La Revolución.”
What spurred this level violence remained a mystery. Partly, the superblocks’ strategic location overlooking not only the Presidential Palace but also, and more significantly, the Ministry of Defense which lay nestled between Blocks 7 and 11 in Monte Piedad had contrived to turn the buildings and their residents into threats in the eyes of authorities quickly losing grip on power. Reports of agitators in the 2 de diciembre in the days leading up to the events likewise contributed to a climate of confrontation. Ligia Ovalles of Block 31 in the Zona Central, then 25 years old, recalls how in the run up to 23 January “subversive flyers” would appear in the morning, sometimes wet with dew, strewn throughout the neighborhood. “Those flyers would explain to you why this or that was happening. During the general strike [begun on 21 January] they said we had to get rid of the dictator because there was no freedom of expression… they told you to get ready, to buy candles, matches, food.” Her memories of handling these flyers revealed much about the environment during that frenetic time: “You had to read them and get rid of them, because if suddenly they raided your house and if they found that, you went to jail. That was tough (eso era bravo) …. One slowly realized what was going on.” By 20 January, “you couldn’t pick them up, because the military took over this place… All those hallways were full of military, armed. They ordered us, with megaphones, not to turn on the lights, or else.” Indeed the neighborhood’s broad streets allowed easy movement of troops, which deployed en masse.59

59 Ligia Ovalles, Interview with author, 14 February 2005.
And as police and military presence escalated, so did tensions, sometimes among neighbors. “You had to be careful; you didn’t know who was who, who might be watching.” One incident in particular continued to amaze Ligia. “One man here was a reservist. He had a bunch of bullets. And two soldiers ran out of ammunition. So he took bullets to them. Later, when Pérez Jiménez fell, the yelling started. He had to leave at dawn one day, because they were going to lynch him. The people. They said ‘We saw you giving them bullets. Watch yourself. You won’t leave here alive.’” Reflecting on the story, Ligia recalled thinking: “That was wrong… How are you going to give bullets to people who were against you? Didn’t he think of his children, his family?”

What remained clear about the final act of a dying regime targeting for special repression the very neighborhood it had built to reflect its prowess were its symbolic dimensions. In narrating the events in the ensuing days, media reported how the “fury unleashed upon residents of that populous neighborhood … gave rise to a proposal asking the Junta de Gobierno to change its name from 2 de diciembre to 23 de enero.” Later accounts reported the area’s new moniker as “21 de enero,” when the national strike had begun. The confusion well reflected the spontaneity surrounding the process by which a revolution took a name, and a symbol. However in March, a neighborhood delegation

60 Ibid. Residents in other Blocks experienced similar tensions in the days after 23 January. In Blocks 20-21 in La Cañada, 70 residents organized self-defense brigades keeping watch from “ten at night to five in the morning.” It was a response to what they referred to as a “terrorist campaign” by presumed agents of the deposed regime, after two people yelled “bomb” in a bid to sow fear among residents. “Campaña Contra Terroristas En Bloques 20 Y 21,” El Nacional, 29 January 1958.

61 “161 Muertos Y 477 Heridos Es El Balance Trágico De La Lucha Por La Libertad.”

62 “Cinco Nuevas Víctimas Enterraron Ayer.”
presented the Caracas city council with a petition with over a thousand signatures, formally requesting the neighborhood be henceforth known as 23 de enero “since Caracas has gotten used to the new name.” The council approved the measure unanimously.\footnote{“23 De Enero Se Llama Desde Ayer La Urbanizacion 2 De Diciembre,” El Nacional, 29 March 1958.} A year later when the Banco Obrero (Worker’s Bank, BO), the agency in responsible for building and administering the superblocks, published its official history celebrating 30 years of public works, the entity that built the superblocks captured the new meaning behind what had by far been its most significant capital investment: the new name, read its history, was quite simply “a reminder of the date when a heroic popular gesture overthrew Marcos Pérez Jiménez’s dictatorial regime.”\footnote{de Blay, 30 Años De Banco Obrero, 149.}

Insisting on a narrative that upheld popular participation, and in particular the participation of residents of the 2 de diciembre superblocks, as a primary factor in Pérez Jiménez’s ouster in fact illustrated a need to harness popular support at the service of an uncertain political project which, at best, had only tangentially sought to coordinate with the urban populace around its plans for a new government.\footnote{Steve Ellner, “Venezuelans Reflect on the Meaning of the 23 De Enero,” Latin American Research Review 20, no. 1 (1985): 246-47. Ellner reviews nearly a dozen monographs, oral histories, and memoirs published around the 25\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of 23 January 1958, covering the events, their antecedents, and their aftermath. Ellner suggests that despite scattered claims of close collaboration between political party activists and military conspirators (claims levied primarily by the former), most agree that “military conspirators acted independently during the first twenty three days of 1958.” Contemporaneous accounts by US Embassy personnel likewise understood the conspiracy preceding the 23 January coup as military matter. Wrote one consular official, “Up to this time, the political crisis has been almost entirely a military affair, and large segments of the public so consider it. This is especially true of the lower classes who have had no opposition leadership presented to it, and who understand little of the implications involved. Shopkeepers and taxi drivers are aware that their business is very slow, and they worry about their economic activity as the government crisis continues, but hope to avoid personal involvement in politics.”} Indeed much in the way the
2 de diciembre had provided an image, later illusion, of popular support for Pérez Jiménez’s regime, the 23 de enero would now provide an image, later illusion, of popular support for his overthrow. Of course, a major difference separated the two narratives: liberty, or at least, a sense that a new era where the possibility to opine without fear of persecution, detainment, or worse was about to unfold. As Ligia noted reflecting on the revolution: “There were those who were against the revolutionaries, but most were in favor, because you heard too much about what those people [in the Pérez Jiménez regime] did, the tortures… Simply put (en dos platos), there was no freedom.”⁶⁶ Even people like Inés acknowledged that Pérez Jiménez’s rule, despite significant material benefits, had sacrificed any popular standing in part by restricting opportunities for participation. Now a new narrative promised an era of “liberty,” anchored in the discourse of revolution, and built around the image of an active and mobilized citizenry at its forefront. Constructing the events of 23 January 1958 in these terms would prove prophetic. Endowed with a new opportunity to speak out, to make demands, to participate, residents of 23 de enero, cast as central players in its namesake revolution, brought forward needs and grievances both new and longstanding.

⁶⁶ Ovalles.
Chapter Two


“It was the first time I saw people descend like that. He was going to pass through Avenida Sucre, and people came down from the hillsides, like ants. I was looking on from above, and you could tell the avenue was full. All Avenida Sucre was full of people waiting for Fidel Castro.”

1 On the first anniversary of the coup that overthrew Marcos Pérez Jiménez and ushered in Venezuela’s “democratic revolution,” Emilia de Pérez stood at the window of her apartment in block 30 of the 23 de enero neighborhood and watched as the leader of Latin America’s newest revolution made his way through ecstatic crowds. Fidel Castro arrived in Caracas on 23 January 1959, just two weeks after his triumphant entry into Havana. On his first overseas trip, Castro arrived to thank Venezuelans for the example they had set a year earlier, and in turn, Venezuelans embraced the “hero of Cuba.” At the airport where hundreds broke through police barricades to greet his plane, a visibly moved Castro reflected on the popular bond linking both nations: “This is amazing. I cannot say if they are Cubans or Venezuelans, but I am certain they are my brothers.”

3 In the afternoon at a massive rally downtown, Castro drew another parallel: “If with a single phrase I could express the emotion I have

1 Emilia de Pérez, Interview with author, 27 April 2005.


felt today, I would say it all by affirming that I feel more moved arriving in Caracas than I did entering Havana.”

Over the next four days, as Castro traveled in and around the city meeting with students, political leaders, and the population at large, similar scenes repeated themselves at every turn. Of the whirlwind visit Mrs. Pérez recalled: “That was such a reception they gave him, the people, the people,” especially those in the 23 de enero. A year earlier the neighborhood that came to be known as the 23 de enero had stood as an emblem of Pérez Jiménez’s vision for a modern Venezuela, named 2 de diciembre to memorialize the date in 1952 he consolidated his rule. But in the days following his overthrow on 23 January 1958, the neighborhood came to stand for a new vision, one of democratic revolution, and received a new name, 23 de enero. In media and political accounts the newly renamed neighborhood emerged as a central front in a popular struggle against the former dictator, its residents’ actions on that day lending popular legitimacy to his ouster. Now, as Venezuelans prepared to celebrate the anniversary of the revolution that brought down Pérez Jiménez, the 23 de enero would emerge as the epicenter of commemorative celebrations, cementing its place in the nation’s emerging democratic history.

Events included groundbreaking for a “National Unity” monument in the neighborhood’s Monte Piedad sector and the inauguration of a plaza and statue for the fallen of 23 January 1958 in the La Cañada sector. On the morning of 23 January 1959, a

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5 Pérez.
fireworks display kicked off daylong celebrations including a memorial Mass, sports events, and a “popular parade” of residents, military cadets, and local athletes. The day culminated in a rally at the neighborhood’s Christ the King Plaza in the Zona Central where guests reflecting a broad range of national political, labor, student, and clerical leaders paid homage the events of the year prior. And capping the events was an appearance by Fidel Castro. Indeed just hours after arriving in Venezuela, Castro made his way to the 23 de enero alongside leaders of the Junta that had led Venezuela for a year, and who had coordinated with local groups to invite the leader of Cuba’s revolution as the guest of honor in celebrations commemorating their own revolution. As Castro toured the neighborhood crowds bearing Venezuelan and Cuban flags lined the streets. Days later, residents added to the symbolism that already characterized their community. To memorialize Castro’s visit, the last two superblocks to be built in the 23 de enero – and Caracas – erected not by Pérez Jiménez but by the Junta that succeeded him, would henceforth bear the name of the mountain stronghold in Cuba from where Castro’s guerillas staged their improbable revolution: Sierra Maestra.

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8 "Pagan a 3 Y 4 Bolivares El Agua Los Vecinos Del Barrio Sierra Maestra," Ultimas Noticias, 30 January 1959. In the months prior to and following Castro’s visit, several neighborhoods staged similar renamings to reflect affinities for the Cuban cause and the Sierra Maestra mountain range that constituted guerillas’ base of operations. In October 1958, residents of a squatter settlement in the eastern city of Puerto la Cruz had named their budding community after the guerrilla stronghold, at the time still a central front in the struggle against Cuba’s Fulgencio Batista. "Sierra Maestra, Nuevo Barrio De Puerto La Cruz," Tribuna Popular, 25 October 1958. In Caracas, too, residents of “Los Mecedores” in the northwestern edge of the capital, at the foot of the Avila mountain range, likewise changed their community’s name to Sierra Maestra in the eve of Castro’s visit to Caracas, taking to the press to solicit “even for a few seconds”
At first glance, Fidel Castro’s January 1959 visit to Venezuela showcased a nation united behind the promise of democratic revolution that had emerged in the wake of Pérez Jiménez’s ouster; indeed in December Venezuelans had successfully staged competitive, multi party elections that would by February result in a peaceful transfer of power. In fact, Castro’s visit helped set in relief deep and far ranging tensions simmering since the very coup he had come to help celebrate: a growing schism between urban and rural electorates, between military and civilian sectors, between political parties of the left and center, and between currents pushing for gradual reform and those clamoring for radical change. During Castro’s visit these tensions revealed themselves, at times overtly and at others beneath the surface. Rivaling Castro in popularity was his host, Wolfgang Larrazábal, the young and charismatic military officer who had been the face of the 23 January coup and went on to preside over the Junta entrusted with leading Venezuela to elections in December. In that role Larrazábal had cultivated an urban following, implementing policy programs around public works, urban unemployment relief, and direct outreach to new squatter communities in Caracas. When the older, civilian Rómulo Betancourt won elections in December, it was Larrazábal who carried Caracas with an overwhelming 66 percent of the vote to Betancourt’s 13 percent. 9 During his 23

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9 Rafael Caldera of COPEI garnered 18 percent of the vote, while the remaining 3 percent were null. "Aplastante Derrota De A.D. En El Distrito Federal, Pero En La Provincia Gana Ampliamente," Ultimas Noticias, 8 December 1958.
January evening speech Castro witnessed the lingering schism first hand, as the crowd booed each mention of Betancourt. Addressing Congress the following day, shouts from the gallery calling for a “real revolution” in Venezuela forced Castro to spring to the defense of the constitutional government. Set against this backdrop, Castro’s visit represented less a celebration of a political system’s consolidation than it did the continuing fragility of, and growing doubts about, Venezuela’s “democratic revolution.”

As a symbol of that revolution, the 23 de enero reflected the tensions that had unfolded in Venezuela in the year since the events that lent the neighborhood its name. Hailed on one hand for their courage, on the other hand residents of the neighborhood fast became a conundrum for the new regime. People like Emilia de Pérez, who like thousands of others had squatted in apartments that remained vacant on the day of Pérez Jiménez’s overthrow, presented the new authorities with a massive legal challenge. Others either unable or unwilling to find an empty apartment had settled on the hills and areas surrounding the superblocks, raising the same ranchos the superblocks had been intended to eradicate. Meanwhile the neighborhood’s symbolic status turned residents into bellwethers of popular sentiment. When coups either real or rumored threatened to oust the interim junta, journalists sought out neighbor associations in the 23 de enero for statements of support for the regime. When riots greeted US Vice President Richard Nixon during an ill-fated May visit to Caracas, a local organizer emerged as the leading suspect in staging the protests. Politically, the neighborhood’s newfound population of

squatters in and around the superblocks coupled with its symbolic weight to turn the 23 de enero into an electoral powerhouse, making it a magnet for partisan overtures. Larrázabal had gained favor by ordering the construction of the superblocks that would later become the Sierra Maestra. In December, reflecting the same pattern repeated elsewhere in the city, residents flocked to the polls to support Larrazábal’s bid for President. And when it came time to celebrate a year of revolution, residents sought ways to capitalize on the attention their neighborhood was to receive, including Castro’s impending visit, in order “to get from the Banco Obrero revindications that have for a long time been lacking in the 23 de enero.”12

This chapter examines the social and political dimensions of Venezuela’s transition to democracy as it was experienced by residents of the 23 de enero. While a narrative of revolution had linked them in name and in spirit with the infant democracy, exactly what direction that democracy would take remained uncertain. For political elites, defining democracy took the form of pacts aimed at ensuring stability. But for residents of the 23 de enero, the promise of revolution was far more dynamic. Viewing this time as one of opportunity, they tested the boundaries of political participation and the promise of the new democracy ushered in by the revolution. And as they defined democracy, they also struggled to define the contours of their own community. Indeed changes in the neighborhood’s composition significantly reconfigured local dynamics. New groups of residents, each with its own set of needs and interests vis-à-vis the community and the state, generated heterogeneous organizing and mobilizing

12 “Fidel Castro Invitado Por Urbanizacion 23 De Enero,” Ultimas Noticias, 13 January 1959.
mechanisms that would occasion internecine conflict. And when the neighborhood’s population ballooned with squatters, so too did its electoral significance, thrusting the 23 de enero further into the fray of national and even international political events. All told, the relationship established between the budding democracy and its namesake neighborhood during this highly fluid time prefigured patterns that would be repeated over the next thirty years. At root, the common thread linking these patterns was contradiction. Support for electoral democracy but skepticism for its leading parties; mobilization in and out of formal channels of participation; heterogeneous identities nevertheless linked in common identity by the inchoate promise of a name, a democracy, and a revolution.

Transforming the 23 de enero: New Constituencies, New Politics

The immediate aftermath of Pérez Jiménez’s overthrow brought an unintended consequence with far ranging significance for both the neighborhood and the democracy that would eventually take shape. Nearly two months earlier construction had ended on the third and most ambitious phase of the 2 de diciembre neighborhood, comprising nineteen superblocks totaling 2910 apartments, and five newly built, four-story buildings scattered throughout both already populated sectors like Zona Central and La Cañada, and as yet unadjudicated sectors like Zona E, F, and Mirador. Among the superblocks in this third phase was the largest of all the ones built in Caracas, 45-46-47 in Mirador, equipped with two more rows of apartments than the standard construction, for a total of 510 units in a single building. Following the pattern begun in the previous two phases,
adjudication of the apartments was slated to begin three months later, in early February 1958. At the time of Pérez Jiménez’s ouster, then, over three thousand apartments between superblocks and four-story buildings remained vacant. On the morning of 23 January 1958, Emilia de Pérez and her four children, the youngest merely three days old, were at their home in La Guaira (one hour from the capital) when they heard about “the business in Caracas, that Pérez Jiménez had fallen, that Pérez Jiménez had fled.” With her husband out of town for work, Emilia’s brother arrived from Caracas to pick her up: “He said, ‘let’s go, because you never know what may come of this and you’re alone here with these kids.’” Upon arriving in the city they watched as thousands whose ranchos the Pérez Jiménez regime had razed converged upon the 2 de diciembre, occupying whatever vacant unit they could find. Alongside her older sister, Emilia went to the area, when a Banco Obrero employee approached the pair, “Look, there’s an apartment,” he told Emilia. “You and your sister don’t have an apartment. Get in there at night with all your kids.” So they did. Lacking keys they forced the door of a unit in a four story building in La Cañada, where the two sisters, nine children in tow between the two of them, would remain.

Elsewhere, in Block 37 of the Zona F, a more chaotic scene had unfolded. For nearly two years before 23 January 1958 Lourdes Quintero, her husband, and four children had lived in Gato Negro, directly across from the 2 de diciembre neighborhood. From there Lourdes often stopped to gaze at the superblocks as construction was


14 Pérez.
underway. While she had heard that only military were to live in the buildings, still she
longingly thought “What I wouldn’t give to get one in one of those.” On the day Pérez
Jiménez fell, “word began to spread that they were handing out keys to the apartments.
Well, everyone started running. I came here, too, with several other women. This was
full of people moving, you have no idea.” Nearby military personnel were said to be
distributing keys; in fact, as Lourdes soon discovered, distribution was a far more
spontaneous affair: “Everywhere we were told ‘No, mama, whoever finds an apartment
just gets in there’ … So we started climbing the stairs, looking to see where there was an
empty apartment.” Meanwhile elevators were not in operation, turning stairs into a
cluttered mess where “people moving refrigerators, washing machines, everything”
converged with those in desperate search of a still vacant unit. Finally, Lourdes found a
two bedroom apartment on the fourteenth floor: “I got in here, and here I stayed.” At
night, after asking a man next door to safeguard her new unit, Lourdes returned to Gato
Negro where her husband has stayed behind, thinking the whole affair too much of a
risk: “‘Who’s going to go there? With kids, how will you manage?’” he cautioned
Lourdes. She replied: “Well, I’m going.” Lourdes gathered a mattress, some sheets, and
her two oldest children, leaving the youngest with their father. “In the morning,” she
sternly told him, “you take them there.” Interviewed nearly fifty years later, Lourdes still
amazed herself with the memory of her deeds that day, “I don’t know where I found so
much courage. There were so many people. That was like an invasion.”

By nightfall on 24 January, no units remained vacant.

The drama of vacant apartments “inaugurating themselves,” as one headline blared, was repeated wherever public works remained officially unopened, and posed problems of different orders for the incoming authorities. Interviewed on 27 January Victor Rotondaro, the newly-appointed Minister of Public Works under whose jurisdiction the Banco Obrero fell, tried to assuage public concerns about the structural integrity of these self-inaugurated roads, bridges, and other structures. Indeed rumors had circulated that agents of the ousted regime had sought to sabotage as yet uninaugurated public works in a desperate bid to impair the new regime. “The news is false,” he declared. But the case of the 23 de enero raised different issues, “A problem that has social complications due to the need for housing that directly concerns the proletariat is that of the superblocks, which though completed, have not been inaugurated with pomp and circumstance because the rebellious population prevented the ousted dictator from doing so.” Attending to the fears of those in the newly occupied apartments who worried they may face eviction, Rotondaro stressed the popular character of the superblocks in this new era of democratic revolution: “Those blocks are of the people and

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15 Lourdes Quintero, Interview with author, 16 February 2005.

for the people. We are looking for a legal formula so those in need can occupy those households.”

Rotondaro’s comments illustrated the fine line new authorities of the Banco Obrero had to navigate when addressing the case of the 23 de enero, between upholding them as an emblem of the popular spirit surrounding the January revolution and contending with the legal implications presented by spontaneous squatting in thousands of apartments. In the ensuing weeks, the Banco Obrero would struggle to find that balance, as residents like Emilia faced the threat of eviction from Banco Obrero officials. Days after she and her sister had squatted in an apartment in La Cañada, Emilia received a summons to appear before the local Banco Obrero office in the same sector [see Appendix III, figure 7]. “The man there told us there was an empty apartment in Block 30 [in the Zona Central], and he needed us to move out of our apartment urgently, because it already had an owner… we said ok, and well, we moved.” Provided with a truck and laborers to move her from La Cañada, Emilia, her sister, and their children found themselves on the move yet again just days after 23 January. But once they arrived in the promised apartment they found it occupied. Laughing, Emilia recalls, “The same thing we had done, a lady had done. Well, that was beyond words! That woman refused to open the door, she said ‘no’ and the Banco Obrero people said ‘yes’ and she said ‘no, no, no’ so in the end, the Banco Obrero folk had to push the door open and told us, ‘get in!’” For the next month, Emilia, her husband and four children, her unmarried sister and five children, and the third woman and her children lived in the two bedroom apartment. “She

minded her business, and we minded ours,” Emilia recalls, until finally the woman, “who apparently already had a house somewhere,” left the unit.  

Emilia’s predicament sheds light on the administrative confusion that beset the Banco Obrero as it tried to deal with the mass takeover of still vacant apartments in the now 23 de enero neighborhood. At the same time, administrative confusion resulted in another unintended consequence – new organizing efforts by groups of residents with a common interest in securing guarantees from the Banco Obrero that they would be able to remain in the blocks. On 29 January squatters in Blocks 50-51 in Mirador organized a Junta Cívica Pro-Vivienda to liaise with authorities. “We have our deposits and the irrefutable proof that we were removed from our ranchos with the promise we would be moved to the Blocks.” To support their claim, neighbors had begun work on a census of fellow squatters. They had also framed their demands in terms “the just right to aspire to housing,” reflecting a pattern that stressed their ownership of as targets of the fallen regime. “We recognize that we forced our way into those superblocks,” the committee admitted, “but since they were made for those of us who were removed from the ranchos, we could no longer tolerate living in the streets waiting for Pérez Jiménez to inaugurate them with the usual pomp he used to dazzle the people.”

By late March, Banco Obrero authorities took a first step in “legalizing the situation” of superblock squatters, promising that no evictions would occur unless tenants showed “irregularities… that they

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18 Pérez.


are people of bad lifestyles and troublemakers [de mal vivir y revoltosos] who perturb the tranquility and morals of other families.”21

Drawing a standard of morality for living in the neighborhood echoed the language that had motivated Pérez Jiménez to build the superblocks in the first place. But it also reflected difficult realities brought forward in the wake of Pérez Jiménez’s ouster. While the confusion surrounding the superblocks’ occupation had given rise to organizing efforts like those of the Junta Cívica, it had also opened the door for opportunism. Among these the case of Diógenes Caballero stood apart. “He was the leader here, he became famous,” remembered Cesar Acuña of Block 45-46-47 in Mirador. Like thousands of others on 23 January, Acuña had come to the superblocks to find an apartment of his own after living in a rancho in the nearby Pro-Patria neighborhood. Unlike most, however, Cesar had a personal connection to the buildings, since he had formed part of the construction crew that in 1957 built the Mirador superblocks (see Figure 5). Once word about the apartments began to spread, Cesar, then eighteen, immediately headed to Mirador, eventually finding a vacant unit on the thirteenth floor of the same Block he had helped build.

But while elsewhere in the neighborhood the process took place wildly, in Mirador Diógenes Caballero Martínez had managed to take control and instill some measure of discipline. Under Pérez Jiménez Caballero had been a broadcaster for Radio Nacional, as well as a columnist for the El Heraldo newspaper, which was aligned with

Yet in the waning days of the dictatorship, Caballero had also sought—and been denied on the basis of his past affiliations—membership in Unión Republicana Democrática, which along with COPEI and the Communist Party had formed the Junta Patriótica in 1957 to mount civilian resistance to Pérez Jiménez. When Cesar arrived in Mirador, Caballero “had set up a command center here, practically like a junta.” Over the next few weeks Caballero, whose use of a black jacket earned him the shadowy nickname “el hombre de la chaqueta negra,” cemented control over Mirador. Recalled Cesar, “It’s not that he was a firebrand (alzado), it’s just that he had a lot of followers on account of having charisma. But the man spent a lot of time dominating [this area], during the change of government.” Indeed, by early February Caballero had caught the attention of both the press and authorities. When residents of the Sucre parish under which the Mirador sector fell organized a Junta to liaise with the interim government, Caballero instead organized what he branded a “Representative Junta” from Mirador. “We have information,” said a member of the Sucre Junta, “that [Caballero] currently has under his orders, and spread throughout all the superblocks, more than 3,000 supporters who follow him unconditionally.” For Cesar, Caballero was “practically an outlaw, like


24 Cesar Acuña, Interview with Author, 27 October 2005.

a vigilante (brigada de orden). He wasn’t within norms.”26 By mid February the press had branded Caballero “the little dictator of the 23 de enero.” Meanwhile the Caracas city government, accusing him of having established a “police headquarters” in Mirador consisting of offices, secretaries, and even a jail cell “for those who disobeyed his orders,” proceeded to arrest Caballero, releasing him days later for lack of proof.27

The strange case of “the little dictator” set in relief the difficulties facing the Banco Obrero as a community built to solve housing problems now turned into their incubator. Yet once the dust left by the initial occupation of vacant units began to settle, a more nuanced picture about the neighborhood’s newest residents and the process by which they had come to the 23 de enero started to emerge. In some cases, families squatted in not one but multiple apartments, seeking later to rent the extra unit for income under the table.28 In other cases, families without the financial wherewithal to pay for apartments had seized units, creating a potential problem for normalizing rent contracts down the road.29 As it attempted to distinguish between squatters with legitimate needs and those who had sought to take advantage of the confusion surrounding Pérez Jiménez’s overthrow, the Banco Obrero unfurled a multi-pronged campaign to “study the problems of residents of the 23 de enero.” In early February, coordinating with social

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26 Acuña.


workers\textsuperscript{30} and some 800 university student volunteers, Banco Obrero officials began a census of new residents of the superblocks aimed at “learning about [their economic conditions], the number of people, and the urgency with which they may need housing.” By mid April the effort had yielded 22,000 surveys, including lists of problems affecting residents.\textsuperscript{31} In late February Raul Hernández Silva, newly appointed as Banco Obrero director, met with a sixteen-person delegation from the neighborhood to hear their major grievances.\textsuperscript{32}

Now anchored in outreach and cooperation with tenants, the Banco Obrero’s efforts to attend to the social life of 23 de enero residents signaled a major policy shift from the “bulldozer” approach that had characterized the entity’s agenda under Pérez Jiménez.\textsuperscript{33} But problems persisted and indeed grew due to the sudden, unplanned, and “undisciplined” – according to Banco Obrero officials – occupation of nearly 3,200 units in two-days’ time. Overnight, the population of the neighborhood had ballooned from approximately 36,000 residents between Monte Piedad, La Cañada, and Zona Central to nearly 60,000 residents with the new areas of Zona E, Zona F, and Mirador.\textsuperscript{34} Making


\textsuperscript{31} “Una Encuesta Con 22 Mil Consultas Hicieron Los Universitarios Entre Inquilinos Del Banco Obrero,” El Nacional, 17 April 1958.


\textsuperscript{33} Castillo D’Imperio, Los Años Del Buldozer.

\textsuperscript{34} Because the 23 de enero did not become a free-standing parish of Caracas until 1967 – before then split into Catedral, Sucre, and Altagracia parishes – these figures represent estimates drawn from the number of units in the various sectors of the 23 de enero, in turn multiplied by an average number of six tenants per household, the Banco Obrero’s official median for working class housing occupancy. Given these figures, the Zona E, F, and G (Mirador) areas of the 23 de enero, which comprised nearly 3,200 units, housed an
matters more complicated, some of the basic infrastructure in the areas occupied on 23 and 24 January remained unfinished. In Block 37, for instance, in addition to inoperative elevators, walls remained unfinished when Lourdes arrived there on 23 January, the building’s bare concrete shell exposed to its spontaneous tenants. More importantly for Lourdes and for thousands of others in the newly occupied areas, as early as the evening of 24 January water service began to fail as unprimed pumps quickly overloaded. For several months, Lourdes and others in her building walked to a spring in the hills behind Block 37 to wash clothes and collect water for home use. By March, electric service in the area likewise faced interruptions, owing to what the company’s Director for Public Relations called facilities that were “in terrible condition.” By mid April, residents in Block 41 in the Zona F reported to the press how faulty pipes forced them to purchase “tins of water for 2 or 3 bolivares apiece.”

Pressures on the neighborhood’s infrastructure constituted the most evident and recurrent of problems facing residents and authorities alike in the newly reconfigured 23 de enero neighborhood in the months following its namesake revolution. But less perceptible issues also surfaced, namely internecine tensions among the new wave of residents and those who had lived in the neighborhood for months and years. Already,

approximate 19,200 people. Meanwhile Monte Piedad, La Cañada and Zona Central comprised some 38,000 residents living in 6,100 units.

35 Quintero. "Faltan Agua Y Aseo Urbano En Bloques 23 De Enero."


the case of Diógenes Caballero had shed light on incipient fissures in the new 23 de enero. His refusal to recognize the Sucre Junta spoke not only of personalist ambitions by a charismatic leader as he tried to consolidate a base of support and operations; it also reflected a generational and geographic split in the neighborhood resulting from the occupation of vacant units. Indeed, alongside the three newly inhabited sectors (Zona E, F, and Mirador), Sucre parish was also home to the populous Catia neighborhood, where historic barrios, ranchos, and superblocks coincided. In part, Caballero and his followers had drawn on this spatial configuration to legitimize their “Representative Junta” as better suited to attend to the particular needs of superblock squatters. Meanwhile in the eastern Monte Piedad, La Cañada, and Zona Central sectors of the 23 de enero, all of which fell under the Catedral parish, residents formed their own Junta in early February to “coordinate and concentrate as one united front the work of the various civic movements that operate in the parish, and find out and lend dedicated support to the social and educational aspirations that residents of the parish confront and demand, especially those of the 23 de enero neighborhood.” 38 In fact, all but 5000 of the parish’s residents lived in the superblocks. The spatial nuances of the 23 de enero illustrated on one hand the potential for power struggles between local groups as each claimed legitimate representation over parts of the neighborhood; on the other hand, they reflected vastly different needs among new and old generations of residents grouped under different jurisdictions, thus marking both a de facto and de jure schism in the neighborhood. For example, whereas squatters tried to organize around securing legal

status and public services, those who had lived in the neighborhood since the days of Pérez Jiménez found themselves struggling to secure revindications of a much different order.

In particular, they sought the opportunity to purchase their apartments, an option denied by the Banco Obrero under Pérez Jiménez. Mainly, though, residents sought a fifty-percent slash in rents, which, according to neighbors, the previous regime had established “capriciously” without taking into consideration their financial means. For their first demand they received early support. In early March, Public Works Minister Rotondaro announced that the Banco Obrero would quickly move towards reinstating a mortgage program, both as a way to stimulate the housing industry and to “draw from [those sales] stable financial results.” And in fact, by late 1958 residents like Emilia in Block 30 had begun to sign contracts buying their apartments outright.

By contrast, the struggle over rents would present a far greater challenge for longstanding residents of the superblocks. As early as February, a delegation representing 2000 heads of households in the Monte Piedad, La Cañada, and Zona Central had sought to meet with Banco Obrero officials to secure rent reductions in accordance with tenants’ ability to pay, from monthly rates of Bs. 280 to half that

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amount.\textsuperscript{41} By late April, residents in other superblock neighborhoods like \textit{Simón Rodríguez}, which the Pérez Jiménez regime had designed as a high rise, high density solution for urban middle classes, received a 10 percent slash in their rents,\textsuperscript{42} feeding the hopes of some in the the \textit{23 de enero} that an attendant reduction in their community may be forthcoming. But by late May they remained in wait, once again seeking a meeting with the Banco Obrero director, once again demanding a halving of rents. This time, however, residents directly appealed to the memory of the January revolution and their participation therein, asking for “exoneration of rents from 23 January to 31 May in honor of the people who fought for liberty.”\textsuperscript{43} The bid worked. On 30 May Hernández Silva, the Banco Obrero’s director, traveled to the \textit{23 de enero} where a crowd of 2,000 assembled to lay out their grievances, chief among them rent reductions. In addition, residents demanded a “revision of water piping, the creation of schools, and the reorganization of trash collection services,” thus highlighting infrastructure problems and needs resulting from the sudden ballooning of the neighborhood’s population, including an estimated 25,000 children.\textsuperscript{44}

Much as invoking the memory of their eponymous revolution had mustered authorities to their midst, residents’ direct appeals ushered in results. A week after


\textsuperscript{44} “Asamblea En El 23 De Enero,” \textit{Tribuna Popular}, 31 May 1958.
meeting with residents of the 23 de enero Hernández Silva laid out, in a statement delivered to the press, the Banco Obrero’s decision agreeing to reduce rents even below projected amounts for residents unable to pay, to freeze evictions on account of rent default, and to allow partial payment without penalty. The Banco Obrero also began work clearing and widening drainage pipes in La Cañada to prevent flooding, in addition to reinforcing the surrounding hillsides in order to forestall mudslides. And by mid June, construction on three new elementary schools in the 23 de enero was underway.

If in part residents’ success in mobilizing the Banco Obrero around their demands owed to their discursive deployment of the January revolution, it had also resulted from a temporary collaboration among far-ranging organizations in the neighborhood, which the Banco Obrero had unwittingly helped foment. While in March it had announced that squatters in the western sectors of the 23 de enero would not face eviction, and by April it had begun the process of securing rent contracts, it had transformed these residents into tenants and therefore immediately linked the surging movement for lower rents with this new crop of residents. In establishing contracts with squatters the Banco Obrero had established a price range from Bs. 133 to 207 depending on residents’ wherewithal, in turn ascertained through the efforts of university students who had surveyed these


46 “Ampliaran Canales De Desague En La 23 De Enero," El Nacional, 4 June 1958. In fact, poorly-drained hillsides adjoining the superblocks, especially in the La Cañada sector, which sat in a natural trough surrounded on all sides by hills, would continue to generate mudslides despite these efforts, and continue for years to come." Al 23 De Enero: Los Cerros Se Le Vienen Encima," Tribuna Popular, 28 June 1958.

families in the months prior. Yet the rates remained elevated for many.\textsuperscript{48} By late June, in a bid to coordinate efforts among former squatters in the western sectors of the \textit{23 de enero}, sixteen Juntas Pro-Mejoras (Pro-Improvements Junta) formed a single body to liaise with the Banco Obrero as a Comité Unico or “Unitary Committee.”\textsuperscript{49} In August, as the Banco Obrero appeared to delay on the rent-slashing commitments it made in June, the committee “urgently convoked” Juntas from “all Banco Obrero neighborhoods in the Federal District” for a summit, to be held in the \textit{23 de enero}, in order collectively to petition for rent relief. It marked an unprecedented effort, cutting across class and spatial differences, to invoke a supra-collective identity based on their common experience as superblock residents. At the same time, it underscored the emerging centrality of the \textit{23 de enero} as a nodal site for articulating and organizing popular demands.\textsuperscript{50}

But while apartment squatters were coming into their own as superblock residents, reflecting needs and, over time, sensibilities akin to those living in the older, eastern sectors of the \textit{23 de enero}, incorporating another group of new residents into the fold of the neighborhood would prove more challenging. Indeed, after the thousands who flocked to the superblocks on hearing of Pérez Jiménez’s ouster laid claim to all vacant units in the area, another kind of squatting began. Press reports one week after the January revolution noted with alarm how “ranchos are being built in green spaces,” the

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same spaces that the just-ousted regime had designed to offer walking and recreation solutions for superblock residents.\textsuperscript{51} As with the occupation of vacant units days earlier, confusion and improvisation marked the construction of ranchos in the 23 de enero, taking place in stages during 1958 and in turn giving rise to a complex social ecology that further added to the heterogeneity increasingly characterizing the neighborhood. The first ranchos belonged to those unable to find an apartment in the days immediately following 23 January. Frequently, those living in these ranchos were the extended family of people who had located apartment units; by settling next to the superblocks, they reasoned, their chances of eventually securing apartments would improve. As such they imagined these constructions as temporary and built them accordingly, consisting of little more than scrap wood and cardboard.\textsuperscript{52}

By mid-year, however, the dynamic changed. As the Banco Obrero delayed on reconciling the issue of high rents for both squatters and longtime superblock residents, ranchos began to emerge less as temporary solutions and more as semi-permanent housing. Angelina Ruiz, a single mother of three who had occupied a vacant unit in Block 45 (Mirador) after Pérez Jiménez fell, found it impossible to handle the monthly rent the Banco Obrero eventually required to normalize her living status, even at the lowest rate of Bs. 113. In June, she took to the hills behind the same superblock she had lived in since 23 January, where over 500 ranchos built from zinc, stone, and plywood had gone up in a matter of days. Even longtime tenants of the superblocks found


\textsuperscript{52} “Venden Ranchos En Pleno Corazon De Caracas,” \textit{Tribuna Popular}, 16 November 1958.
themselves leaving their apartments and taking to ranchos in the green areas in between. Carmen Manzanilla, for instance, who lived in Block 23 of the Zona Central before 1958, reported to press how though she “lived better” in her apartment, “with what my husband earns it is very difficult to care for ten children, clothe them, send them to school, feed them, and pay Bs. 173 to rent an apartment. My husband’s salary is Bs. 500.” Like Angelina, Carmen and her family built a rancho in Mirador, joining thousands of others in the creation of a new rancho community. At times these new constructions used the same foundations of houses the Pérez Jiménez regime had razed to make way for both superblocks and green spaces, adding to the sense of permanence and increasingly, irony, of new rancho communities in the 23 de enero.53

The irony of improvised housing resurrected in areas once seen as the front line in a “battle against ranchos” was lost on no one, least of all those whom the Pérez Jiménez regime had forcibly moved to make way for the superblocks. “That was the saddest thing,” recalled Ligia of Block 31 half a century later. “They moved us supposedly to build green spaces, but it turns out that now there are houses and buildings and everything… Now, there’s a building in the same place where our house stood. No green spaces at all.” On one hand Ligia’s case was unique. Her family had lived in Catia for nearly three years before the Banco Obrero designated her home for demolition. “My mother,” she recalls, “was one of the ones who cried and cursed” as bulldozers razed

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the house they had spent years building.\textsuperscript{54} On the other hand, Ligia’s bitterness toward ranchos in the 23 de enero shed light on widespread tension between superblock residents, especially those who had lived in the area since Pérez Jiménez, and rancho dwellers. In the space between Monte Piedad and La Cañada, the Barrio Sucre sector emerged as a community of squatters in the months after the January 1958 revolution, slowly consolidating in the ensuing decade. Overlooking Barrio Sucre in Block 1 in Monte Piedad, Mireya Maldonado recalled how on first seeing ranchos there residents organized to prevent further construction because “they were a … bad reflection [on the neighborhood] … We would go confront them, go out there or look out our windows and tell them they couldn’t do that, how could they think they were going to put up a shantytown [rancherío] there, that that’s going to be a den of thieves.”\textsuperscript{55} On the other side of Barrio Sucre, in La Cañada, Eloy Deslances of Block 17 recalls how “There was a time when we were at war, there were confrontations. We wouldn’t accept that they come here, to do as they pleased. So we’d put a stop to them. They would come, to use our [athletic] courts, but that’s it.”\textsuperscript{56} At root lay a very distinct sense of superiority, as Guillermo Parabón of Block 3 in Monte Piedad lays bare. “We went about stigmatizing them, how they used to be, starting out with very humble homes, so we would label them ‘rancheros’ … One always had in mind that we lived better because we were in big

\textsuperscript{54} Ovalles.

\textsuperscript{55} Mireya Maldonado, Interview with author, 3 February 2005.

\textsuperscript{56} Eloy Deslances, Interview with author, 19 January 2005.
apartments, we had our roads, our public services, not like them. They had to draw water from a public well.”

And yet initial animosity eventually gave way to resignation. In Monte Piedad, Mireya remembers, the initial conflicts between barrio and superblock residents “didn’t last long because once they were all settled, what more could you do?” Asked if her neighbors organized against rancho dwellers, Ramona Velasco in the four-story Block 15 in Monte Piedad echoed Mireya’s sense of impotence. “No. That was that. What could one do?” Meanwhile, in the squatter communities surfacing throughout the neighborhood, few held any illusions about the disdain residents of the superblocks, especially those in the eastern sectors of the neighborhood, sent their direction. Inés Alvarez was only six when her mother, single and with three children, moved from the western state of Trujillo to Caracas. They settled in a squatter community of ranchos near Block 7 in Monte Piedad. “Ever since we arrived,” she remembers, “the [people] of the superblocks have never accepted us. They kind of cast us to the side. [They say] ‘Those are the hillsiders (cerreros).’” Echoing Eloy’s testimony, Inés makes special mention of the strict territorial fault lines that emerged between both two spaces, signaling a split not just spatial but also cultural. “They used to say, ‘All this space belongs to us’... There were many disagreements, they didn’t want us to have chickens or banana trees because they just didn’t like that.” The effect on social relations was

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57 Guillermo Parabón, Interview with author, 3 February 2005.

58 Maldonado.

59 Ramona Velasco, Interview with author, 14 February 2005.
predictable. “I only had one friend who lived in the superblocks,” remembers Inés. “We went to school together, to parties. But that was my only friendship.” Meanwhile, seen from the superblocks, Eloy paints a similar picture. “There were very few people who hooked up with them.”

If ranchos created tensions among residents of the 23 de enero, they would generate even greater problems for the Banco Obrero. While interim authorities had in part conceded the issue of rents for superblock residents, lowering some by as much as 50 percent in response to popular pressure, in the case of the ranchos they made no such concessions, instead taking a hard line that evoked the days of the just-deposed Pérez Jiménez. In early March the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of the Interior, and the Caracas city government convened a joint task force to “study the grave problem created by the construction of new ranchos in the Federal District.” Aside from revealing the issue’s importance to authorities, the committee’s composition – drawing from institutions responsible for the military, police, and city legislature, respectively – also prefigured the kind of response that would mark its approach to ranchos. The first set of “immediate measures against the construction of new ranchos” aimed at prevention, in the short term by deploying “intense police vigilance,” and in the long term through a “propaganda and education campaign” aimed at warning of the risks to health and

60 Inés Alvarez, Interview with Author, 8 March 2005.

61 Deslances.
hygiene brought by living in improvised housing. But the committee’s primary focus was the “destruction of ranchos.” On 5 March six contingents of Army and police headquarters (Comandancia de Policia) personnel set out to begin razing in six western Caracas neighborhoods, including the 23 de enero. Captain Pedro Chalbaud Troconis, chief of staff of the police, revealed the inter-institutional interplay between local executive power and the state’s repressive apparatus that would lend the operation both a legal and final character: “in accordance with a public announcement published by the Governor of the Federal District, that office will not recognize the claims of ranchos because they were built without permission.”

But these measures failed. Spurred on by what some in the press took to calling a “rural exodus” to Caracas in the wake of the January revolution, rancho construction continued and in fact, intensified. In particular, rural migrants felt lured to Caracas by the promulgation in March of the “Plan de Obras Extraordinarias,” popularly known as the Plan de Emergencia, which sought to attend to nearly 60,000 people left unemployed in the capital in the wake of the January revolution. By late March the issue took on added urgency as the Junta de Gobierno convened an emergency meeting of the cabinet and select state governors and city mayors to identify “more efficient actions and …

impart categorical instructions to completely paralyze the construction of new ranchos.”

These would include “severe military vigilance” such as “identification checks” of all people entering Caracas in “an effort to contain flow towards the capital.” Once again, however, the hallmark of the “special provisions” was rancho eradication. In early April, addressing reporters on the progress toward that end, the Director of the National Guard Academy emphasized the protocols National Guardsmen were to use when conducting their mission:

On arriving at the rancho the patrol captain will ask permission to enter and notify [its occupants] that he will proceed to raze the rancho. He will tell the owner of the rancho to collect his money in order to avoid any subsequent claims; [he will] at all times avoid the destruction of furniture or appliances inside the rancho; if anyone is sick [he will] transport them to wherever family members who live in the rancho indicate …; should the patrol have to detain anyone, they will be handed over to the nearest civilian authority; the patrol will avoid violations or abuses of authority, but they must be firm.67

On one hand, publicly detailing procedures around razing ranchos marked a crucial component in the government’s long term “education” campaign, serving as a deterrent for would-be rural migrants. (The Director was happy to report that in most cases “the people who inhabited the [razed] rancho have come to their senses and have returned to where they used to live.”) On the other hand, publishing the protocols of rancho eradication sought to illustrate a measure of transparency that stood in dramatic contrast to the days of Pérez Jiménez. Indeed, when it came to ranchos, interim authorities

66 “Medidas De Emergencia Para Resolver Problema De Los Ranchos,” El Nacional, 30 March 1958. In August, the measures would extend further as the National Institute for Agriculture moved to relocate recent rural migrants back to their places of origin in the countryside. “Listo El Programa Del I.A.N..”

struggled to balance discrediting the violence and arbitrariness that marked the former regime’s approach to the urban housing, while also upholding both the language and practice of rancho eradication that had so deeply informed Pérez Jiménez’s presidency, a balance that proved more difficult to maintain as government measures gained urgency. For instance, just as the first round of razing was giving way to more “radical” measures in late March, *El Nacional* newspaper published the testimony of Feliciano Carvallo, a popular artist who would go on to win the National Award for Painting in 1966. In February 1957, while Carvallo was away, a Banco Obrero delegation slated his house for demolition to make way for “one of the Blocks of the ‘National Ideal,’” alerting Carvallo to move in two days’ time. However, “innocent as his paintings, [Carvallo] did not believe such a criminal process was possible,” so he made no preparations, and when the time expired, his rancho went up in flames along with 20 works of art. It was, read the article, evidence of “the barbarism of the dictatorship,” violent, arbitrary, and evidently different from the far more humane and transparent protocols of democratic revolution.

The differences, however, remained a matter of shades and framing. Ultimately the interim government’s hard line against ranchos followed the same pattern established under Pérez Jiménez: eradication, followed by ex-post-facto study, followed by public relations efforts, followed by the construction of superblocks, all at the service of a “national campaign against the construction of unsanitary ranchos.”

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68 “Medidas De Emergencia Para Resolver Problema De Los Ranchos.”


70 “Medidas De Emergencia Para Resolver Problema De Los Ranchos.”
executive committees appointed to study the problem issued their first sets of reports, focusing on relocation prospects for 1,800 families living in ranchos in Caracas.\textsuperscript{71} But data from the Banco Obrero produced only a week later revealed that the capital housed upwards of 40,000 ranchos, suggesting an enormous deficit between future prospects and current conditions.\textsuperscript{72} In the ensuing months, the language of the dictatorship – targeting hygiene, morality, and ultimately, national self-image – resurfaced in press analyses addressing the “grave national problem” posed by ranchos: “Everyone knows that the type of housing designated as rancho is a sign of an absolutely primitive stage… where the family lives in promiscuity, [favoring] the destruction of the moral fabric.”\textsuperscript{73}

Much as the 2 de diciembre emerged as the central front in Pérez Jiménez’s battle against ranchos, the 23 de enero would again become a front line in this renewed effort to eradicate improvised housing in Caracas, this time under democratic revolution. On 3 March the Banco Obrero announced that it would build six additional superblocks in the 23 de enero, totaling 900 apartments.\textsuperscript{74} The move sought to attend to the population of rancho dwellers who took up residence in the green areas of the neighborhood in the days following Pérez Jiménez’s overthrow, hoping precisely for the opportunity to eventually take up residence in apartments. After a bidding process placed the cost of the new


\textsuperscript{72} “40 Mil Ranchos Hay En Caracas Segun Datos Del Banco Obrero,” El Nacional, 14 April 1958.


\textsuperscript{74} “Seis Edificios Para Familias Obreras,” El Nacional, 4 March 1958.
buildings at Bs. 12 million,75 construction began the second week of April, with an
anticipated delivery date of October.76 By October, the first families began to move in.

To be sure, building new superblocks represented an emergency measure on the
part of interim authorities as they sought to alleviate an acute housing crisis. But it also
anticipated the political importance the 23 de enero would play in the democratic
revolution’s first electoral contest, scheduled for December. When the neighborhood’s
population exploded from 36,000 to nearly 60,000 overnight, it made for an electorate
that, while internally riven, coupled symbolic weight with a fast-burgeoning population
to become a major prize in the new political calculus of democratic revolution. In
particular the Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV), outlawed since 1950, mounted an
aggressive campaign seeking the support of residents of the 23 de enero. As early as
February 1958, when it resumed publication of its weekly organ Tribuna Popular, the
PCV began outreach efforts with urban popular sectors through regular coverage of the
needs and demands of this constituency. In a piece titled “Barrios That Fought Against
Tyranny Demand Solutions to their Urgent Problems,” the paper set out to delineate the
approach it would follow as it jockeyed to consolidate itself as the voice of urban popular
sectors. It began by drawing on the same narrative of popular participation that had cast
2 de diciembre residents as central to the January revolution, recounting the repression to
which the superblocks and other Caracas barrios had been subjected in the process of

Banco Obrero, Resultados De Licitacion Para Nuevos Bloques En El 23 De Enero," El Nacional, 23 March
1958.

“breaking the chains that kept bound freedom of expression.” The piece then proceeded to list grievances of “four barrios whose residents exposed their lives to police bullets day and night.” The link was clear. “Now that the working class can speak, it lets its first claims be heard,” and it would do so through the PCV.77

By April, when rent reduction became the major grievance for Banco Obrero tenants throughout Caracas, Tribuna Popular cast their organizing efforts, focused on the 23 de enero, as shining examples of the kind of “organization of the masses” that should mark Venezuela’s entry into a new democratic era “The struggle against high rents … has become one of the rallying cries that in the least time has managed to organize thousands of Venezuelans,” in turn “propelling” the government junta to take measures to study the problem. The link between “organization of the masses” and political power was thus made clear, and Tribuna Popular sought to make itself an ally in that struggle.78 When in late April the Banco Obrero announced its first series of reform measures, linking rents to financial wherewithal and thus rejecting an across-the-board reduction, Tribuna Popular columnists echoed the disappointment of the superblocks’ residents, castigating officials for acting on the basis of “catastrophic predictions” about the impact of rent slashing without considering the “just revendications” underlying tenants’ claims.79

The paper also coupled its critiques of the Banco Obrero with an occasional column dedicated exclusively to collecting grievances by residents of the 23 de enero. In

77 “Cuatro Barrios Que Contribuyeron a Derrocar La Tiranía Claman Por La Solución De Sus Urgentes Problemas,” Tribuna Popular, 1 March 1958.


its inaugural installment, the column reported about a dearth of “cultural and political activity” for neighborhood youth, calling for the formation of groups that could “channel and direct the combative spirit of youth.” It would follow this with a multi page exposé drawing heavily on residents’ own voices, revealing how “misery in the skyscrapers” had resulted in a “struggle for survival,” especially by squatters in the western sectors of the neighborhood. Again linking the “heroic superblocks” to a narrative of popular revolutionary struggle, reporters described how “The murderous bullets [of the dictatorship] rang and left deep holes in the walls that remind us of the scars of imprisoned fighters… We look up. Thousands of scars of point us to the painful birth of democracy.” In particular, the piece addressed squatters’ demands for public services, chief among them trash collection. “The trash and waste grow in imposing mounds that make one think they are competing with the height of the blocks… It looks like an area abandoned by the Urban Residential Waste Management (Aseo Urbano Domiciliario).” Water, too, remained a chief concern for squatters. “Sometimes,” the paper reported, “they don’t sleep in order to wait for the cistern trucks [which] arrive late at night or at dawn.”

Seeking the support of urban working classes, and in particular of residents of the 23 de enero, was a move both bold and ironic. Although Pérez Jiménez had abolished the PCV, his urbanizing policies, centered in Caracas and geared towards the working


class, helped to create the very electoral constituency the PCV now hoped to capitalize upon in order to secure standing in the new democracy. Already, attention by media - not just the Communist press but mainstream publications more broadly - attested to the neighborhood’s capacity to mobilize the press to their advantage by appealing to their narrativized prominence in the revolution of 23 January. But much as with the narrative of revolutionary struggle, as a community the 23 de enero remained largely a construct. If in both intent and design, construction of the superblocks had aimed to promote homogeneity at the service of disciplining, modernizing, and civilizing urbanism, the effect of revolution had been heterogeneity. Three separate constituencies had risen in the wake of 23 January – the neighborhood’s original inhabitants, squatters, and rancho dwellers – each one adding a layer of complexity to the neighborhood’s social and political ecology as identities turned into grievances and then turned into organization, sometimes internally fraught. But as attention from interim authorities, media, and political parties indicated, it was precisely this heterogeneity that turned the 23 de enero into a coveted political prize. In this sense, if the 2 de diciembre had been the brainchild of Pérez Jiménez, the 23 de enero was decidedly a product of the revolution. And as the initial fray of revolution gave way to political campaigning ahead of elections in December, the 23 de enero would only grow in prominence, its residents determined to make real the leading roles into which they had been cast.

Projecting Beyond Borders: Richard Nixon and the 23 de enero

82 Frechilla, "La Comisión Nacional De Urbanismo."
At long last, interim authorities had grown tired of “the little dictator of the 23 de enero.” On 14 May 1958 police raided the apartment of Diógenes Caballero in Block 45 in Mirador. According to press reports, “Caballero did not resist … if anything he seemed surprised by the warrant for his arrest.” After all, months earlier the city government had accused Caballero of installing a para-state in the neighborhood, with himself as ruler. Officials had even detained him, soon releasing him when they proved unable to assemble a case. “That time they accused me of being a looter and a conspirator,” Caballero told reporters at police headquarters, “But they could prove nothing and had to set me free. Now I don’t know what they have against me. I’m completely ignorant.” But the charges on this occasion far transcended squabbles over local governance. While he waited, “one of the reporters told [Caballero] the accusations against him were serious, that apparently he had made new mistakes,” chief among them, planning to kidnap US Vice President Richard Nixon.83

Nixon had arrived in Venezuela on the morning of Tuesday, 13 May 1958. It was the final leg of a goodwill tour of Latin America that had included Colombia, Peru, and Uruguay. At each stop angry crowds had converged on the US Vice President and his wife, decrying US support of dictatorial regimes in the region; in Lima students at the San Marcos University nearly stoned Nixon. Just days before Nixon’s arrival in Caracas, Venezuela’s ambassador to the US, Hector Santaella, personally conveyed to State Department officials his “grave concern” for the rash of demonstrations, adding they “were not typical of those held in Latin America,” while expressing “hope that there

83 “Acusado El Pequeño Dictador.”
would be no such incidents when the Vice President visited Caracas.”

According to US Embassy memoranda, all along Nixon’s route “mobs constantly accused the United States of supporting dictators.”

Wrote *Time* magazine days later, “Over the rigid shoulders of a line of Venezuelan soldiers at Maiquetía Airport, streams of spittle arced through humid sunlight, splattered on the neatly pressed grey suit of the Vice President of the U.S. and on the red wool suit of his wife. But worse was in store: less than an hour later Dick and Pat Nixon brushed close to injury and possibly death in [the] violence-torn streets of Caracas.”

The most intense demonstrations came on Avenida Sucre, just below the *23 de enero* and where months later Fidel Castro would make a triumphant entry into Caracas. Of his own experience Nixon would later write, “Out of the alley ways and side streets poured a screaming mob of two to three hundred, throwing rocks, brandishing sticks and pieces of steel pipe… Those who had no weapons used their feet and bare fists to beat up on the car.”

Eventually taking refuge at the U.S. Ambassador’s residence, Nixon was greeted by members of the ruling junta who sought desperately to apologize for the incidents.

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Junta President Larrazábal in particular expressed his remorse: “It is very sad,” he said. “I shall never forget this thing in all my life.” Meanwhile back at the State Department, acting Inter-American Affairs Secretary William Snow convened Venezuela’s diplomatic delegation to relay President Dwight Eisenhower’s official dismay at his sense that “the Vice President and his party apparently had been abandoned to the mob.” By morning, the chargé d’affaires in Washington, Eduardo Acosta, relayed the Venezuelan government’s “assurances of protection … to guarantee the personal safety of the Vice President and his party, and to avoid a recurrence of the incidents which took place in Caracas yesterday.” These assurances included the deployment of “military units, tanks and armored cars … stationed at strategic points around the city,” among them Avenida Sucre and its overhanging 23 de enero superblocks. By noon on Wednesday, 14 May, Nixon and his delegation reached Maiquetia without incident, shortly afterward boarding a plane out of Venezuela. That same afternoon, police issued a warrant for Diógenes Caballero, broadcasting bulletins on all commercial radio stations. By nightfall police

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88 “The Guests of Venezuela.”


91 “El Caso Diogenes Caballero: Adelantan Averiguaciones Para Pasar El Asunto a Tribunales.”

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had arrested 88 people in connection with the protests,\(^2\) none more prominent than Caballero, taken in his apartment in the 23 de enero, and charged with planning the demonstrations in a bid to kidnap the Vice President and eventually reinstate Marcos Pérez Jiménez as President of Venezuela.

Caballero’s fate would play out over the following days. More immediately, the fact that the authorities turned to the 23 de enero in search of agitators revealed much about the neighborhood’s contradictory place in the emerging political order unleashed by the January revolution. For one, it again confirmed the 23 de enero as a central site where struggles over the meaning of revolution were being waged, this time against the backdrop of events with far ranging geo-political consequences. As diplomatic historian Alan McPherson notes, it was the events in Caracas that “jump-started US worries about anti-Americanism as a distinct phenomenon in Latin America,” later consolidated as Cuba’s revolution made anti-US fervor a key organizing principle.\(^3\) Likewise, historians Marvin Zanihsen and Michael Weis have cast Nixon’s trip “as generating a period of creative tension that stimulated the United States to reshape long standing policies toward Latin America and to recast them in major ways.”\(^4\) In Venezuela, Nixon’s reception forced authorities to scramble, with consular officials in Washington straining to prove “that the demonstrations in no way reflected the sentiments of the Venezuelan people, but

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\(^3\) McPherson, Yankee No!, 3.

of only a small minority. Yet marginalizing popular expressions of discontent was a risky strategy, especially when they were centered in a neighborhood otherwise cast as heroic within a narrative of revolutionary change. If anything, Caballero’s arrest cemented the 23 de enero’s place as a hotbed of popular organization, where radical currents coexisted with other forms of more palatable organization, such as residents’ efforts to form a united front around the issue of rent-reduction and, of course, the continuing narrative of heroic struggle around the 23 January revolution. To this end, Caballero’s arrest illustrated a tension between popular revolutionary heroism and an emerging reality of dangerously independent collective action residing at the margins of interim authorities’ aims, however inchoate these remained.

More broadly, authorities’ response to the Nixon protests laid bare a growing gulf between political and urban popular sectors. Officials in both the US and Venezuela had been caught off guard by the demonstrations that greeted Nixon’s arrival. Newsreels depicting the events effectively captured the general sentiment of surprise. “The Caracas outbreak exceed[ed] the darkest expectations,” expectations built on a bevy of downplayed and misread warning signs in the weeks and months preceding Nixon’s visit. As McPherson writes, “Venezuela brought together many of the conditions that made Latin America so propitious for a mass-based anti-US incident.” In a post-visit report,

95 Bartch, Acosta, and Snow, "Memorandum of Conversation: Venezuelan Assurances of Protection for Vice President."


97 McPherson, Yankee No! , 28.
for instance, State Department personnel noted how “the Caracas police force was completely dispersed by the Revolution [of 23 January 1958]. This meant that it was undoubtedly difficult for the Venezuelan government to obtain advance information about the plans of the extremists. Moreover, it did not have a well organized, well trained body of police to deal with the mob.”98 Venezuelan officials shared this assessment. In a post-visit meeting at the State Department, Chargé d’Affaires Acosta shared his assessment of the episode with Acting Assistant Secretary Snow, noting how “the inability of the police to safeguard the party was due to the fact that the police force had recently been reorganized, and was composed of teenagers and other untrained and inexperienced persons who were reluctant to take strong action.”99

But the major animating tension ran far deeper; in particular, US support for Pérez Jiménez’s regime had rested on roots both public and longstanding, set in relief in 1954 when President Eisenhower awarded his Venezuelan counterpart the Legion of Merit, Degree of Chief Commander. As late as mid-January 1958, despite a failed coup against Pérez Jiménez on 1 January, and despite acknowledging that results of a December plebiscite keeping Pérez Jiménez in office had been fraudulent,100 Secretary of State John Foster Dulles nevertheless reported to President Eisenhower that the regime was strong.

98 Wardlaw and Snow, "Background for Demonstrations in Caracas against Vice President Nixon."

99 Bartch, Acosta, and Snow, "Memorandum of Conversation: Venezuelan Assurances of Protection for Vice President."

and should continue to be seen as an ally.\textsuperscript{101} Predictably, the events of 23 January placed the US government in a bind. While it moved to recognize the new junta, eventually doing so by 28 January,\textsuperscript{102} it also had to contend with the reality of its past “policy of collaboration with the Pérez Jiménez Government,” as Director of South American Affairs Maurice Bernbaum noted in a 3 February meeting with Oregon Congressman Charles Porter, who had recommended Eisenhower personally “congratulate the Venezuelan Junta Government on the overthrow of the Pérez Jiménez regime and its determination to restore democratic government.” Venezuela’s revolution unleashed a debate within the State Department about “putting the US government on record as favoring democratic governments over dictatorships,” in particular since “the relatively small number of remaining dictatorships would minimize the gravity of reactions which might possibly be expected.”\textsuperscript{103} This debate would eventually pave the way for Nixon’s ill-fated goodwill tour of Latin America. Some like Bernbaum supported the move thought not at the level of the President. Others like then-Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Roy Rubottom considered that the best route was to establish a pro-democracy message at the highest level.\textsuperscript{104}

\textsuperscript{101} John Foster Dulles, “Memorandum for the President,” RG59/Records of the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs/Lot File No. 60 D 249, Subject Files Relating to Venezuela, 1955-1958, [Box 2 of 2] Box 2 of 28/Folder 92, Memoranda File, Jan-June, Chronological, 8 January 1958.

\textsuperscript{102} Charles R. Burrows, “Presentation of the U.S. Note of Recognition to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Cesar Garcia Velutini, of the Junta Government of the Republic of Venezuela,” RG59/Lot File No. 60 D 249, Subject Files Relating to Venezuela, 1955-1958, [Box 2 of 2] Box 2 of 28/Folder 70.1, United States, 28 January 1958.


\textsuperscript{104} Zahniser and Weis, "A Diplomatic Pearl Harbor?,” 169.
Yet the US government’s decision in March to grant entry, and later asylum, to Pérez Jiménez and the head of his broadly reviled Seguridad Nacional, Pedro Estrada, signaled a contradictory policy, one which drew immediate and widespread criticism in Venezuela. The decision prompted Vicente Lecuna, Jr., director of the Banco de Venezuela and treasurer of the Junta Patriótica that had helped organize civilian resistance to Pérez Jiménez, personally to warn State Department officials on 9 April:

“Although there is no anti-American sentiment in Venezuela,” Lecuna informed Under Secretary Christian Herter, “this situation could change completely almost overnight” as a result of the visa issue. In addition, anticipating conflict over the matter in the weeks ahead, Lecuna urged Herter to “expel the two men… [and] better if this were done before Vice President Nixon arrived in Venezuela next month.”

When Nixon arrived, just as Lecuna had anticipated, US embassy personnel recorded how “the mobs continually shouted about the admission into the United States of the ex-Dictator and the ex-Chief of

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105 Pérez Jiménez initially fled to the Dominican Republic on the morning of 23 January 1958, but by March he had settled in Miami, where he lived lavishly for years while Venezuela’s government pursued extradition charges against him for the crimes of “murder, attempted murder, embezzlement or criminal malfeasance, and acting as an accessory in those crimes.” Judith Ewell, "The Extradition of Marcos Perez Jimenez, 1959-63: Practical Precedent for Enforcement of Administrative Honesty?," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 9, no. 2 (1977): 291, 98. Pedro Estrada likewise arrived in Miami in March, where after being granted a 30 day visa, he leased a house, … paid six months’ rent in advance, entered his children in school, and made arrangements with a doctor for medical care for his wife, who was expecting a child in May.” Pedro Estrada, Alicia Perez De Estrada, His Wife, Alicia Ybara and Maria Luisa Ybara, His Minor Children, Appellants, V. Edward P. Ahrens, District Director United States Immigration & Naturalization Service, Miami, Florida, as Agent for William Rogers, Attorney General of the United States, Appellee (1961).

Secret Police … accusing us of sheltering these men.” Yet as late as 14 May the State Department defended its position on principle, asking Venezuelan diplomats with surprise why the visa issue could rouse such passions, since “the leaders of all three major parties had benefitted personally from the same visa policy during the Pérez Jiménez regime.” And yet at the same time, the Nixon protests shocked the US government into action, even if surreptitious. While they maintained a public position of neutrality with Venezuelan officials, beginning on 16 May, State Department officials used backchannels and anonymous contacts to pressure Estrada and Pérez Jiménez to leave the United States voluntarily, succeeding in the case of Estrada who flew to Geneva on 18 May. Pérez Jiménez, however, responded far differently, stating that he “did not intend to leave the United States, that he … had made it easy for the United States to conduct its business in Venezuela.” According to contacts, Pérez Jiménez also “hoped that his presence here in the United States would cause a scandal, that he had the best lawyers and the money necessary to fight extradition or deportation… and if they refuse[d] to extend his permit he will ‘then put to the test American Democracy.’”

American democracy would continue. But Pérez Jiménez had succeeded in putting to the test Venezuelan democracy, such as it was just four months after his overthrow. Indeed, the fact that Venezuela’s political sectors had so grievously misread

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107 Wardlaw and Snow, "Background for Demonstrations in Caracas against Vice President Nixon."

108 Bacht, Acosta, and Snow, "Memorandum of Conversation: Venezuelan Assurances of Protection for Vice President."

their population demanded immediate and public action to stave off embarrassment, or worse. The arrest of a public figure like Caballero in a symbolic neighborhood like the 23 de enero fit the bill perfectly, and news of his detention soon made the rounds of international press wires. Yet in the ensuing days it became increasingly clear that Caballero’s arrest was little more than a face-saving measure. Even for someone the press had termed an “imp with delusions of grandeur,” and whose previous employ included outlets friendly to Pérez Jiménez like El Heraldo and Radio Nacional, the claims lobbed against Caballero – involving an international conspiracy to foment chaos, kidnap the US Vice President, and re-instate Pérez Jiménez in the ensuing clambor for order – seemed at best implausible. But if the purpose had been to sow unrest in order to seek order, then Venezuelan Chargé D’Affaires Acosta might have responded differently to Under Secretary Snow’s warning that “there were times when strong measures were necessary to safeguard democracy, as the United States had learned painfully in meeting the threat of Communist subversion,” to which Acosta replied “he was in complete agreement.” In Caracas the transitional Junta echoed Acosta and proved itself capable of enforcing order when it deployed military throughout Caracas to safeguard Nixon’s departure. In addition, in their bulletin police had claimed Caballero may be en route to

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10. In response to the Nixon protests in Caracas, the US government mobilized Marines to nearby positions in the Caribbean Sea, ready to deploy should “the Venezuelan government prove unable to control the situation.” “Nixon Ordeal: Venezuela Mob, and Hero’s Welcome Home.”


Colombia, fleeing to the border city of Cúcuta where with Pérez Jiménez “henchmen” he had hatched the plot against Nixon. Yet hours after broadcasting the bulletin, police found Caballero in his apartment in the 23 de enero, unsuspecting and fully cooperative.

These and other inconsistencies would continue to nag at public opinion, even as the case against Caballero pressed ahead both in the courts and in the press. On 15 May police moved Caballero from their headquarters to the city jail. Meanwhile print media moved feverishly to probe Caballeros’ claims to membership in a series of political and professional organizations, all immediately disavowing any links to the accused.114 But the seemingly fantastical nature of the charges lingered, and on 18 May, they were accentuated when the chief of police admitted their evidence amounted to little more than reports that Caballero “had been seen on Avenida Sucre, where serious incidents against Nixon took place, but the time the events were happening.” The fragility of the evidence fueled rumors about Caballero’s imminent release “because [authorities] had been unable to prove anything.”115 But what the press dubbed simply “El Caso Caballero” continued to grow in complexity. On 19 May police executed arrest warrants on five prominent left-wing professionals accused of conspiring with Caballero and Pérez Jiménez agents in planning the anti-Nixon demonstrations. Their arrest followed a public accusation by PCV leader Gustavo Machado. In response, the men called Machado’s accusations a “masterpiece of humor, worthy of Mark Twain” and a “smokescreen to deflect the

114 Caballero claimed membership in the Unión Republicana Democrática party, the Sindication (Should this be Sindicato?) de Trabajadores de la Radio y Televisión, and the Asociación Venezolana de Periodistas. "El Caso Diogenes Caballero: Adelantan Averiguaciones Para Pasar El Asunto a Tribunales."

public’s attention” from charges levied against the PCV itself for instigating the demonstrations. And in fact, nothing came of the arrests. By 21 May, almost a week after detaining him, police released Caballero with no fanfare. Press reports, which had earlier covered every detail of the case, laconically noted: “Diógenes Caballero, ‘the man of the black jacket,’ was set free last night by members of the police intelligence service.”

The saga surrounding Nixon’s visit helped expose a gulf between transitional authorities and popular sectors months after the January revolution; the hasty arrest and embarrassing release of Caballero reflected a reactionary approach to dealing with popular protest in Caracas. In the next few weeks, this tension between urban popular sectors and the state would only accentuate. One month after Nixon’s visit, mass demonstrations broke out in front of the Presidential Palace over the dismissal of Dr. Celso Fortoul from his post as Municipal Engineer. As the city’s chief urban planner, Fortoul had undertaken an ambitious construction and reconstruction agenda centered largely in barrios and squatter communities. Fortoul had also relied on the Plan de Emergencia to staff projects. Both measures had helped endear Fortoul to urban popular sectors. On the morning of Monday, 16 June, Caracas governor Col. Vicente Marchelli notified Fortoul that “given the circumstances,” he had been replaced, though according to Fortoul, those “circumstances” remained unspecified. Later that evening, a

government spokesperson reported that Fortoul’s dismissal owed to “a minor reorganization” of the city’s administrative apparatus. But the response only fueled speculation about an imminent end to the Plan de Emergencia, which had since its inception generated criticism for wastefulness, corruption, and encouraging rural migration to the city. For sectors that had benefitted from the plan, the loss of someone they had seen as an ally in city government seemed a first step toward its elimination.

As news of Fortoul’s dismissal spread during the evening, Juntas Pro-Mejoras from throughout Caracas, including the 23 de enero, began to assemble a response. By 2:00 p.m. on Tuesday, thousands had gathered in the Plaza Bolívar in front of the city council to demand Fortoul’s reinstatement, considering his “destitution an assault against popular interests and democracy and against the Plan de Emergencia.” When Governor Marchelli asked for 72 hours to “study the case,” the multitude proceeded to the nearby Presidential Palace, where members of the Junta de Gobierno promised a delegation of protesters that the Cabinet would immediately take up the matter. Yet the crowd refused to budge, prompting Junta President Larrazábal himself to meet with representatives. Over an hour later at 6:30 p.m., Larrazábal had agreed to the demonstrators’ demands, promising not only to reinstate Fortoul, but also to replace


120 "Dice Sindicato De La Construcción: Destitución De Fortoul Obedece a Saboteo Del Plan De Emergencia," Tribuna Popular, 21 June 1958.

Marchelli, who resigned that very evening.122 Wrote Tribuna Popular days later: “The popular joy was unbridled after this great victory of the masses, which once again proved that the spirit of 23 January continues to burn and is ever watchful … of the enemies of democracy.”123

In the immediate aftermath of the demonstrations, urban popular sectors moved to give their successful but episodic mobilization organizational form. On Monday 23 June, one week after Fortoul’s ill fated dismissal, over 200 representatives from neighborhood groups in Caracas assembled to assess the reach of their street actions, and to discuss next steps. Carlos Martínez, president of the recently-formed Comité Unico of the 23 de enero, an umbrella group of sixteen juntas representing the neighborhood’s western sectors, gained unanimous support from the assembly when he stated that the time had come “to create an organization that channels the work of the numerous revindicative organizations in the city, and that protects its militants from the attacks of reactionary elements that are still plugged into the government and try to torpedo the just mobilization of the barrios of Caracas.” After designating a Steering Committee responsible for studying what shape such a city-wide group would take, the assembly issued a statement echoing Martinez’s plea: “The time has come to structure a powerful organization capable of centralizing the great popular revindicative movement that rose


123 “Gran Manifestacion De Los Barrios Caraqueños.”
up (insurgido) after January 23."\textsuperscript{124} Three weeks later, the 255 delegates to a citywide assembly of barrio organizations voted formally to create a Confederation of Juntas Pro-Mejoras, electing a twenty member directorate, and resolving to “dedicate ourselves to study and solve the most urgent popular problems.”\textsuperscript{125}

Set against the backdrop of Nixon’s visit just one month earlier, the government’s response to this new mobilizing and organizing fervor by urban popular sectors appeared to reflect a significant change of attitude and approach. Not only did authorities acquiesce to popular sentiment on the streets, but the demonstrations also prompted an immediate popular outreach effort by the Junta de Gobierno, which two days later staged a visit to one of the nearby barrios from which Tuesday’s demonstrations had originated.\textsuperscript{126} In part, the move revealed a sense by government officials that they were fast growing out of touch with the same urban popular sectors they had upheld as paragons of the struggle for democracy less than five months before. But there was also a sense that, if left unattended, the schism between state and urban populace could end in violence. Indeed, on 23 June Hector Santaella, who had since been recalled as Ambassador to the United States to serve instead as secretary of the Junta de Gobierno, offered an insider’s account of the 17 June demonstrations to the US Embassy’s third-in-


\textsuperscript{125} These included “housing, the high cost of living, unemployment, education, which will for us be our chief banner, as well as defending street children, the construction of public schools and kitchens, the creation of cultural centers and maternity aid stations, [and the] defense of free education at all levels.” “Organizada La Confederación De Juntas Pro-Mejoras,” \textit{Tribuna Popular}, 19 July 1958.

command Charles R. Burrows. “All that afternoon,” Santaella noted, “when [the Junta] was attempting to decide what to do,” officials lay in fear that “something like the Bogotazo of 1948 might develop.” Indeed Santaella had long been surprised by the fact that “despite the high emotional aftermath of the revolution,” no manner of violence had ensued. “If the government had not retreated from its position,” Santaella reflected, “it would have been necessary first to use tear gas, then perhaps machetes and then as a last resort, sub-machine guns. If five or six people had been killed, a real riot would undoubtedly have developed with a most serious problem for the Government and for the country. It was in view of all these considerations that the decision was finally taken to restore Fortoul to his job.”

If by responding to popular demands – whether out of fear or political calculus – the Junta had helped close the gap with urban popular sectors, it had also strained relations with other sectors. On 21 July Minister of Defense José María Castro León issued an ultimatum to the Junta de Gobierno as prelude to an planned coup he hoped would extricate Acción Democrática and the PCV from the ranks of government. As early as 13 February Castro León had alerted US Embassy personnel that the military would intervene at the sight of any perceived weakness on the part of the Junta. In this light, the spark for his 21 July ultimatum had been precisely the series of popular


mobilizations beginning with Nixon’s visit, stating, “The military institution, as well as all responsible sectors of the country, saw with alarm the embarrassing events that took place during Vice President Nixon’s visit to Venezuela, since both in international and domestic public opinion these events have been interpreted as a complete lack of authority in the government to ensure public order.” Addressing the recent protests over Celso Fortoul, the ultimatum read: “The Junta’s conduct and its errant decisions in resolving the case of Col. Marchelli in his post as Governor of the Federal District has erased the inherent authority of the Executive … so that the pressure of a group of workers dependent on the government enervates in an embarrassing way the legal attributions of the Executive Power.”

Response to Castro León’s attempted coup followed in the mold established a month earlier around Fortoul’s dismissal. At first only rumors circulated, since according to subsequent press reports, “the government remained absolutely muted.” Yet despite and perhaps because of the silence, wrote Tribuna Popular days later, “the Capital flocked violently, organized, and resolved to prevent” the coup. Organization had come in the form of coordination between Juntas Pro-Mejoras and political party sectionals throughout the city, which had received word of Castro León’s full aims after he met on 22 July with Rafael Caldera of the center-right COPEI party and Jóvito Villalba of the centrist URD party in an unsuccessful bid to gain their support. That same


afternoon, crowds assembled in front of Miraflores to “defend their democracy.” Meanwhile in Block 6 of Monte Piedad in the 23 de enero, the building’s newly-established Junta Pro-Mejoras announced to the press their “unbreakable purpose to decidedly support the Junta de Gobierno” and to “defend the democratic order” as a fundamental part of their struggles to secure community improvements. In the streets neighbors had, according to Tribuna Popular, expressed their support for the promise of democracy more contentiously. “All night on Tuesday [the neighborhood] was poised for combat,” as “Order Brigades” set up barricades throughout and by Wednesday at noon, had completely sealed off the neighborhood. Women took to “patrolling” their buildings’ hallways, while “men were at the barricades and children provided the rocks and steel rods, as well as bottles to make molotovs.” In the meantime, vehicles went from one part of the neighborhood to the other, carrying news and instructions. It was an action mirrored elsewhere in the city’s popular sectors and which helped give the Junta the upper hand. By 4:30 a.m.on July 23, Larrazabal announced the resignation of Castro León, who fled to exile in Colombia.

Popular response to Castro León’s attempted coup reflected in part the Junta’s success in reaching out and responding to the demands of urban working classes in the wake of Nixon’s visit. More broadly, it lay bare that whatever else it meant or would

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132 “Caracas: En Pie De Lucha, Obreros, Estudiantes, Mujeres, Y Ninos En Defensa De La Democracia.”

come to mean, democracy for urban popular sectors implied an opportunity to make
direct demands of, be heard by, and achieve results from government. Support for that
opportunity had helped motivate popular participation in the January revolution;
defending it had led neighbors from the 23 de enero and elsewhere among urban popular
sectors in Caracas to take to the streets in July. On 7 September they would again
mobilize to defend this opportunity, this time in the face of a second, far more violent
attempted coup against the Junta government. Led by dissident mid-level officers, the
coup appeared to draw on Sanatella’s fear, turned to hope by the conspirators, that a rash
of civilian deaths would result in a Bogotazo-like upheaval, thereby exposing the Junta’s
weakness and, in the ensuing chaos, open the door for its overthrow. US Embassy labor
attaché Herbert Baker, who on hearing radio reports at 7:00 a.m. “that there had been an
attempted coup and that various democratic groups were rallying to the support of the
Government Junta,” had gone downtown “to observe the crisis.” On arriving in the
vicinity of Miraflores:

There was a large group of people assembled in front of the White Palace
[Presidential Honor Guard barracks, across from Miraflores]. As usual during a
crisis, there was a microphone and loudspeaker mounted on the balcony. Shortly
after my arrival, a speaker announced that Admiral Larrazábal … was on his way
back to Caracas and the crowd cheered… [Then] there was a burst of fire
followed by several rounds of submachine gun or automatic rifle gun fire which
appeared to me to be directed above the heads and into the crowd… Many of the
people attempted to escape down the side streets besides Miraflores Palace and
some individuals called for the people running away from the Palace to go back
and ‘get those killers’… We saw several attempts of the crowd to get into the
military police barracks…"134

134 Herbert W. Baker, "Eyewitness Account of Incidents before Government Junta Offices on September 7 -
the Day of the Latest Military Coup Attempt," RG59/1955-59/Central Decimal File, Box 3033/Folder
731.00/8-158, 19 September 1958.
Meanwhile, in the nearby 23 de enero, “armed groups . . . installed barricades in key sites” like the road leading to and from the Ministry of Defense in La Planicie, between Blocks 7 and 9 of Monte Piedad (see Figure 9).\textsuperscript{135} When a truck left the Ministry, neighbors suspecting its occupants of being part of the coup stopped it and nearly lynched its passengers, “whose lives were practically saved . . . by the timely intervention of the Naval Forces” stationed in Cagigal Observatory, just above Block 7 of Monte Piedad. Elsewhere in the neighborhood, in the Andrés Eloy Blanco of squatter settlements behind Mirador, “nearly a hundred residents, men and women, detained two armed spies after a gunfight and handed them over to authorities, not before getting a sound beating (paliza) at the hands of el pueblo.” By afternoon, a mass rally in nearby El Silencio, where residents of the 23 de enero joined thousands of demonstrators flocking from of other Caracas popular sectors like San Agustín, Las Adjuntas, San Juan, El Valle, and Pedro Camejo.\textsuperscript{136} By nightfall, the coup had been quashed. In all, eighteen people had lost their lives, and 100 had been wounded.\textsuperscript{137}

Baker’s account and the reports of battles and barricades at the 23 de enero confirmed popular backing for the transition government, and in particular, for Wolfgang Larrazábal who, according to historian Elena Plaza, “had become a popular idol”\textsuperscript{138} in the


\textsuperscript{137} Velasquez, "Aspectos De La Evolución Política De Venezuela En El Último Medio Siglo," 217.

\textsuperscript{138} Elena Plaza, \textit{El 23 De Enero De 1958 Y El Proceso De La Consolidación De La Democracia Representativa En Venezuela} (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1999), 114.
months after Nixon’s visit, as reflected in the cries of support news of his impending return to Caracas elicited on 7 September. They also spotlighted the strategic centrality of the 23 de enero, no longer only in symbolic terms but also in spatial terms, harboring within its midst the Ministry of Defense from which the two conspiracies against the Junta had originated. All told, Nixon’s visit and the popular response it drew had unleashed a seemingly contradictory dynamic between state and urban populace. On one hand, they had revealed a gulf between interim authorities and popular sentiment. On the other hand, they had revealed to urban popular sectors their constituent power when mobilizing in the streets. Learning from that episode and channeling their grievances through organized but determined street actions, their success in reinstating Fortoul in June had only confirmed urban popular sectors’ power, while forcing the Junta to move to resolve the balance between institutional and social stability in favor of the latter. But urban popular grievances and their attendant forms of organization, contentious or otherwise, extended only so far. Threatened with a return to the days when it was impossible to make demands of government, they had shown themselves ready to defend their newfound ability for mobilization. These contrasting currents were especially explicit in the 23 de enero, whose residents had shown themselves fully ready to mobilize independently and at times in rejection of government direction, while also fully capable and willing to place that zeal in the service of organizing around the defense of democracy as they understood it, as the guarantor of mobilization. As Venezuela readied for elections, residents of the 23 de enero would project their strategic significance, their electoral weight, and their organizing zeal into the fray of political campaigning.
On Friday, 20 June the Communist Party of Venezuela announced that it would hold the first public rally of its planned “Growth Campaign” for the city of Caracas on the following Sunday.\footnote{\textit{"El P.C.V. Celebrara Un Acto El Domingo El El 23 De Enero," El Nacional, 20 June 1958.}} It was a propitious time for an event of this type. Just four days earlier, mass demonstrations by the urban populace had succeeded in reinstating Carlos Fortoul as Municipal Engineer while forcing Caracas Governor Vicente Marchelli to resign. Aiming to expand the party’s reach among urban popular sectors ahead of elections in December, the PCV now moved to seize upon the popular effervescence left in the wake of the previous week’s mobilizations. And to maximize its reach, party leaders scheduled the rally to be held at the 23 de enero.

Selecting the 23 de enero was, of course, a calculated strategy. The Nixon protests and their outcome had again thrust the neighborhood into the center of national events, consolidating its place as a hotbed of popular mobilization and as a central front in ongoing struggles over what role popular sectors would play in shaping the new democracy. In the months after the January revolution, the PCV had already shown its strength by reaching out to urban popular sectors, in particular the 23 de enero. In its weekly organ Tribuna Popular, the party had lent voice to residents through occasional columns devoted solely to local grievances. In its regular coverage, the paper had sought to entrench itself in the neighborhood in two ways, first by reporting extensively on the conditions of squatters in the 23 de enero, and second by anchoring its stories in extensive interviews as a way again to lend voice to area residents. The PCV had also
sought to extend its reach in the neighborhood through the fast-sprouting neighborhood groups – the Juntas Pro-Mejoras – that formed in the wake of the January revolution. When residents of the Catedral parish, comprised primarily of the eastern Monte Piedad sector of the 23 de enero, organized a local Junta just two weeks after 23 January, a Communist Party militant, Carlos del Vecchio, became its second-in-command. Now, as the PCV prepared to move into the realm of political organizing in earnest, it again turned to the 23 de enero.

At the rally, held in the Zona Central’s Cristo Rey Theater, del Vecchio opened by outlining the party’s platform as it pertained to grievances articulated by residents of the neighborhood: the halving of rents and the immediate construction of “popular housing” aimed at workers earning no more than Bs. 200 a month. Del Vecchio also stressed how, since its inception in 1931 as Venezuela’s first political party of the twentieth century, the PCV had always struggled to “forge a democratic and progressive Venezuela.” Then Secretary General Gustavo Machado took the stage, making his first public remarks in Caracas since returning from six years of exile under Pérez Jiménez. Warning of “provocateurs” seeking to disrupt the spirit of national unity forged in the January revolution, Machado alerted, “We must remain vigilant against all these machinations so as to guarantee the truce that allows Venezuelans to strengthen what we have conquered and proceed in the path to constitutionalism. This unity is necessary since the same electoral results will have to be defended from any threat, either foreign or

domestic.” To those clamoring for the marginalization of the PCV as a liability in a
democratic system, Machado noted that the opposite was true. “A strong Communist
Party is a contribution to national unity, to the defense of democracy and to the social and
economic progress of our nation … We want for Venezuela a patriotic and democratic
government.”

Focusing on three key messages – local grievances, “patriotism,” and above all
electoral democracy – reflected a two-pronged strategy on the part of Machado and the
PCV. On one hand, by aligning its aims with those of area residents, the party certainly
sought to marshal local support and therefore increase its ranks. On the other hand, by
speaking at the 23 de enero, Machado was also hoping to project his message beyond the
neighborhood, drawing upon its status as a bastion in the struggle for democracy and
using the media attention that such status connoted in order to allay fears about the nature
and intent of the PCV. Indeed, allegations that Communist Party militants had
surreptitiously organized protests around Nixon’s visits (heavily promoted by US
Embassy and State Department officials) thrust the party into the spotlight of national
debates about its place in the unfolding political system. For most mainstream sectors,
the PCV had secured its place in the political game not only by virtue of the democratic
aspirations of the new regime, but also, and primarily, for the role Communist Party

141 “Primer Acto Publico De La Campana De Crecimiento Del Pcv En El Df: El Gobierno Debe Tener Una
142 Wardlaw and Snow, "Background for Demonstrations in Caracas against Vice President Nixon."
143 Indeed Nixon himself, just one week after the incidents in Caracas, noted to outgoing Venezuelan
Ambassador Hector Santaella that “the Communists and anybody else for that matter should be allowed to
speak up, to publish what they thought, and to advocate what they felt necessary, but they definitely should
militants had played in underground organizing against Pérez Jiménez. Speaking to the US Embassy’s Charles Burrows in the days after the Fortoul demonstrations, Junta Secretary Hector Santaella noted “the delicacy of the situation and the difficulty which the Government faces taking strong action at this time against the Communists.” In particular, Santaella referenced “the part the Communists played in the overthrow of Pérez Jiménez.”

So visible was the PCV’s presence in public affairs, and so seemingly acquiescent were Venezuelan authorities, that as late as August, US Embassy officials were forced to admit the “conspicuous lack of success we have had to date in attempting to persuade Venezuelan officials and other responsible persons that action is necessary to curb Communist activities.”

But the principal reason for the presumed lack of concern regarding the PCV had less to do with any sense of loyalty or democratic fervor than with a broad-based belief that the PCV in Venezuela was largely irrelevant due to its lack of support, its international roots, and its inability to pose an electoral challenge. In a speech delivered on 4 July, President of Acción Democrática Rómulo Betancourt expressed his party’s position: “We support the Communist Party’s legitimate right to operate in Venezuela as a legitimate organization … [But] the doctrine of the Communist Party is organized not be allowed to advocate, incite, or participate in violence.”

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144 Burrows and Santaella, "Memorandum of Conversation."

around an international doctrine, and the doctrine of AD has been forged by hearing and interpreting the national reality, and it is a doctrine definitively, categorically, and permanently nationalistic and Venezuelan.”

By juxtaposing AD’s “nationalistic” roots to the PCV’s “international” ones, Betancourt hoped to cast aside the PCV as foreign and inherently unable to relate to ordinary Venezuelans. But the marginalization of the PCV extended beyond public commentaries. In the conversation with Burrows he held in the wake of Fortoul’s protests, Junta Secretary Santaella noted, “Action will definitely be taken against [Communists], however… He pointed out that the Junta is not consulting with the Communists as it does other parties on national issues. The Communists resent this very much, he said.”

PCV militants may have resented their exclusion from state affairs, at first informal, and in October formalized as the Pacto de Punto Fijo. But the simple fact remained that they could be excluded because by all accounts, including PCV leaders, the party’s formal reach was minimal. In this sense, if the PCV hoped to make itself relevant in the emerging electoral democracy, it needed to create an electoral base.

Against this backdrop, launching the party’s “Growth Campaign” in the 23 de enero served multiple functions. Repeated emphasis on the party’s commitment to

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147 Burrows and Santaella, "Memorandum of Conversation."


149 In an interview with historian Elena Plaza, PCV leader Hector Rodriguez Bauza recalled that by the party’s own count, its militants numbered no more than 300 on the day Pérez Jiménez fell. Plaza, El 23 De Enero De 1958, 166.
democracy, constitutionalism, and in particular the militant defense of the vote that seemed like hollow claims gained legitimacy when spoken in a cradle of the popular democratic revolution. Highlighting the PCV’s heritage as Venezuela’s oldest political party, along with calls for a “patriotic” government, aimed to downplay attacks based on its presumed foreignness. More significantly, however, targeting the 23 de enero for special attention helped to undermine claims like Betancourt’s that AD was best equipped to “hear and interpret the national reality.” Focusing its campaign on urban popular sectors was precisely an attempt to interpret a new national reality created in the wake of Pérez Jiménez’s rule. As historian Ramón J. Velasquez remarks, the country Betancourt returned to in 1958 was not the country he had left for exile in 1948. In the intervening decade Venezuela had undergone an urbanizing boom that by 1958 showed no signs of abating. As symbols of that boom, of the January revolution, and of the new and variegated urban electorate consolidating in its wake, the superblocks of the 23 de enero and their residents made an ideal setting in which to seek and project new political strength.

As campaigning kicked into high gear in October, the PCV further cemented its relationship with the 23 de enero and its residents, launching its electoral bid in the neighborhood where four months earlier it had unfurled its “Growth Campaign.” As before, the event sought to build on the strength of local organizers to cement its neighborhood presence, while also projecting beyond the neighborhood. Speakers included Lyon Pérez and Carlos del Vecchio, residents of the eastern La Cañada and

Monte Piedad sectors of the 23 de enero, respectively. Eduardo Gallegos Mancera, the party’s main candidate for Caracas city council, also spoke, while the marquee orator was Pompeyo Márquez, the PCV’s primary nominee for senator from Caracas. On listing its candidates for Congress, the party announced its nomination of Eloy Torres of the La Cañada sector of the 23 de enero as one of its three candidates for the chamber of deputies, representing Caracas.

But where the PCV made the most inroads, in the 23 de enero as in Caracas more broadly, was in aligning itself with Wolfgang Larrazábal. For months since the May announcement of December elections, Venezuela’s major political parties – AD, URD, COPEI and the PCV – had sought a single candidate to field for President, thereby avoiding the kind of inter-party rifts that had left the political system ripe for military intervention during Venezuela’s first democratic experiment in 1947. Unable to settle on a unity candidate, however, on 31 October AD, URD, and COPEI agreed to stage competitive elections, but to ensure institutional stability, they signed a pact to share the spoils of electoral victory among the parties through the apportionment of ministries and political posts. While AD and COPEI quickly moved to nominate their respective founders – Betancourt and Rafael Caldera – as candidates, URD’s founder Jóvito Villalba and its President Ignacio Luis Arcaya looked elsewhere and found instead in the youthful Larrazábal a potential avenue to electoral victory. On 13 November, Larrazábal resigned as Junta President to accept the candidacy from URD, with party President Arcaya earlier


confiding to US Embassy First Secretary John Cates the “astuteness and the political implications of its move.”  

Three days later, while decrying the “personal ambitions” that had led to separate candidacies, and blasting the inter-party pact from which it had been excluded, the PCV announced that it was throwing its support behind and tying its future to Larrazábal.

Supporting Larrazábal in part reflected an historical alliance between the PCV and URD dating back to 1952, when though formally banned, the PCV had supported the presidency of URD’s Jóvito Villalba in an ill fated run against Pérez Jiménez that would lead the latter to steal Villalba’s victory and declare himself winner, on 2 December. But as had been the case with URD’s nomination of the Junta President, the PCV was not looking back, but ahead, and in particular, to Larrazábal’s enormous popular appeal among Caracas’ working classes. Indeed, the PCV had decided to support Larrazábal primarily for what it considered his “popular and democratic mentality. In the conflicts that the Junta de Gobierno experienced, at the time of decision making, he always did so in favor of the people.”  

In fact, as early as Nixon’s visit, Larrazábal had begun to steer the interim government in the direction of popular sectors through affect more than policy, like the Plan de Emergencia. Though publicly expressing remorse and apologies to Nixon and deploying military to protect the Vice President’s party on its departure,

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155 “Larrazabal Candidato P.C.V.”
privately he allegedly confided to friends, “If I were a student I would have done the same.” Within government, officials expressed how Larrazábal’s “amabilidad” (amiability) was “his greatest weakness as well as his greatest strength,” offering candid commentary to reporters and supporters that often resulted in trouble for his staff. For instance when *Time* reported on the protests that eventually restored Celso Fortoul as Municipal Engineer, Larrazabal offered an oblique defense of Venezuelan Communists, noting that “he could not believe that a Venezuelan born in the land of Bolívar would accept instructions from abroad.”

By July, following Castro León’s botched coup, Larrazábal’s popularity had reached even material culture. When key chains bearing on one side his likeness and on the other an image of the Virgin Mary became a hot commodity on the streets of Caracas, Larrazábal, a devout Catholic, publicly rejected the items and ordered them confiscated if found and the “parties responsible punished.” When the possibility of a Larrazábal presidential run began to circulate as early as July, Juntas in several Caracas barrios anticipated political parties’ own courting of the Junta President and began independently to collect signatures formally to nominate Larrazábal. Much as the Fortoul protests had prefigured, popular sectors had come to view Larrazábal as their spokesperson and only

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157 Burrows and Santaella, “Memorandum of Conversation.”


guarantor of protection, and in the process, Larrazábal too had learned to cultivate his appeal. In September, as crowds in front of the Presidential Palace fought off a coup attempt while Larrazabal was in the interior, some speculated that he purposely delayed returning to Caracas owing to his “sense for the dramatic.” In August, when a delegation of widows of the fallen during the overthrow of Pérez Jiménez met personally with Larrazábal to seek financial support from the government, it was enough for him to promise to find a solution in order to satisfy the group that Larrazábal would do justice by “the victims of the revolution.”

All told, reflecting on the person he termed “an unintentional leader,” historian Ramon J. Velasquez has written that since taking the reins of government in the wake of Pérez Jiménez’s ouster, Lárrazabal:

had become the major figure of the new government, not by virtue of holding the title of President of the Junta, but by virtue of his words, gestures and deeds which due to their spontaneity, defined a singular and novel personality who caused attraction and sympathy in vast popular sectors. It is the contrast between a terse dictator, rough and distant, and this man who speaks the simple language of simple people, who crosses himself in public and offers blessings and who is understood by the illiterate who surround him when he descends from the offices of the Presidential Palace to dialogue with agitators leading a demonstration. Without intending to do so he soon creates sympathies and blind adhesions which turn into popular support and political strength… The unclassified masses of Caracas who did not want to fill party ranks, nor carry union cards, found in Larrazábal their leader.

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160 Cates, Arcaya, and Silva, "Memorandum of Conversation: Venezuelan Political Situation: Candidacy of Admiral Wolfgang Larrazabal; Ur View."


Stressing Larrazábal’s affective qualities, rather than the Junta Government’s economic relief programs like the Plan de Emergencia, as a way to understand the bond between urban populace and the Junta President helps to appreciate the personal dimensions of the relationship between state and urban popular sectors during this period of democratic transition and learning. In the case of the 23 de enero, its residents too reflected the affective links to Larrazábal expressed elsewhere among urban popular sectors. When rumors of an impending coup surfaced in July, the Juntas Pro-Mejoras of the Mirador sector of the neighborhood issued a statement manifesting their “support for the President Admiral Larrazábal for his patriotic gestures aimed at leading the country to a constitutional regime which is what most Venezuelans demand.”\textsuperscript{163} In late September, when the issue of rents threatened to explode into mass protest, Larrazábal personally assuaged tensions by going to the neighborhood, where thousands gathered to request rent relief directly from the Junta President. Tribuna Popular called it “one of the most heavily attended rallies of the people to fight for their revendications.”\textsuperscript{164} Against this backdrop, Communist support for Larrazábal, coupled with the party’s outreach strategy in the 23 de enero, fit well with its broader aims of building an electoral base rooted in urban sectors.

Yet when coupled, Larrazábal’s popularity and his support by the PCV contrived to create a backlash that further set in relief a divide between urban popular sectors and

\textsuperscript{163} “Notas Del 23 De Enero,” Tribuna Popular, 19 July 1958.

political and economic elites. Alone, the PCV posed little risk. Riding the coattails of Larrazábal, its prospects were now much improved, and in the context of the Cold War and Venezuela’s still very much contested future direction, sectors fearing a communist direction took notice. As early as August, anti-Larrazábal sentiment was evident. In a 5 August meeting, Venezuelan geologist Dr. Victor López, who had participated in Castro León’s ill fated attempt to seize power in July and now claimed to speak for sectors of the Venezuelan Army and Air Force, alerted State Department officials that a second coup was forthcoming “very soon, perhaps even in a matter of days.” Soliciting “arms and ammunition” or in their absence, that the US “at least not side with the opposition,” López warned that “the interests of the United States could not possibly be advanced by a government which was in collusion with the Communists,” adding, “It was known that Larrazábal had nightly meetings with their chiefs.” He went so far as to imply “that both Betancourt and Larrazábal have homosexual tendencies.” Victor Algrant, Commercial Attaché at the US Embassy in Caracas, recalled of the meeting, “Dr. López’s presentation was made in a very forceful and impressive manner… While his statements are colored by his own intense hatred of Communists and the AD … there is something about the man that makes the substance of his story quite credible.”

Four weeks later, on 7 September, a second coup attempt indeed took place, warded off in large part by the quick action of urban popular sectors in support of the Junta Government and, in particular, Larrazábal.

As Larrazábal’s candidacy grew imminent, so did his perceived threat, fueling more intense opposition and anti-Communist efforts. On 31 October John Cates at the US Embassy received and remitted to the State Department a list titled “Leaders of the Communist Party in Latin America,” submitted to him by Oswaldo Gibelli, who claimed leadership of a shadowy group of “dedicated anti-Communists [who] were self constituted and had many collaborators” in the military, government, and foreign oil companies. In a subsequent meeting with Cates, Gibelli conveyed that his group “wishes to help the United States and wishes help from us” – in particular, logistical help in “checking the movements of all Communists in and out of Venezuela, particularly arrivals.” Reiterating López’s earlier request, Gibelli stressed that while he and his group understood the US could not support a coup, it asked that “the United States be not against [sic] any well organized socially conscious golpe (coup).”

Meanwhile Communists were growing bolder. In early November the mayor of San Juan, Puerto Rico, Felisa Rincón de Gautier, visited Venezuela as part of a delegation funded by the US Education Department to foster links between Caribbean nations. On 8 November, addressing a meeting of trade unionists at the historic Casa Sindical (Union Hall) in Caracas, Rincón faced a hostile reaction as hecklers again and again interrupted her speech. In particular Eloy Torres of the 23 de enero, recently named PCV representative to the Comité Sindical Unificado Nacional (National Unified

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Trade Union Committee, CSUN), used his turn at the dais to deliver what US Embassy personnel called “an anti-US tirade.”

In the days before the 7 December elections, the backlash against Larrazábal and his PCV allies intensified, as did their own efforts at securing electoral victory by marshaling the support of urban popular sectors. Larrazábal in particular became target of an intense media campaign unfavorably comparing him to Juan Domingo Perón, the erstwhile populist leader of Argentina who had fled his nation after a 1955 coup. In particular the center-right COPEI party had fanned the flames of this comparison, and was rumored by some to have actually begun the negative campaign, not through its candidate Rafael Carrera, but rather through surrogates, especially a young up-and-coming copeyano editorialist writing in the western state of Zulia, Luis Herrera Campins. The accusations sought to highlight the personalist dimensions of Larrazábal’s appeal to popular sectors. Specifically, in the view of Communist Party leader Pompeyo Márquez, they sought to represent the “unorganized, lumpen proletariat” as susceptible to the whims of a military figure with no political trajectory or platform who was unprepared for the sophistication required to participate in a democracy in which the military would be subordinated to civilian control. But the links seemed at

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best implausible, especially since Perón had long since cemented his credentials as an authoritarian figure much in the mold of Pérez Jiménez. Indeed on 23 January 1958, Perón had been in Caracas Pérez Jiménez’s guest. More broadly for Larrazábal’s defenders, like Márquez, links to Peronism were opportunist and shortsighted, tending to “create a schism that will make difficult the constitution of the next unity government.” Indeed, turning the tables on those who claimed that popular sectors’ support of Larrazábal signaled irresponsibility, Márquez noted, “The radicalization of those masses who demand solutions to their most urgent needs … [and] the state of emergency that continues to mark our national panorama requires that columnists and political leaders rethink what may work well in the heat of elections, but which may end up negatively in the time between now and 7 December, [and] in the period from 8 December to the inauguration of the winning candidate.” Still, just two days before elections, authorities arrested the crew of a helicopter, including a member of the Caracas Archdiocese which had come to spearhead opposition to the PCV, for blanketing the city with anti-Communist propaganda.¹⁷⁰

Defending Larrazábal again showcased the PCV’s gamble in supporting the young military officer who had captured the imagination of urban popular sectors. But it also belied a sense of triumphalism by the PCV in the days leading up to the elections. In an interview with international press on 1 December, the PCV’s secretary general, Gustavo Machado, outlined his party’s expectations should Larrazábal win the

¹⁷⁰ “Tripulantes Del Helicoptero Que Lanzaban Propaganda Anticomunista Fueron Detenidos,” Ultimas Noticias, 6 December 1958.
presidency, once more stressing that in supporting Larrazábal the PCV had first and foremost pursued an electoral strategy: “The PCV,” Machado noted, “would give Larrazábal ‘the margin’ of votes necessary for the election,” which they estimated at 200,000. For the PCV itself, it hoped that affiliation with Larrazábal would bring them six representatives and two senators in Congress. Still, in a bid to allay the fears of some in AD and COPEI, Machado stressed the PCV would neither expect nor seek any cabinet posts in a Larrazábal administration. They would, however, “vigorously” opine on the designation of the Ministers of Education and Interior, and in particular, the Minister of Public Works under which the Banco Obrero was housed.171

Machado and his fellow Communists could be excused for feeling triumphalist. On 27 November the party closed its campaign at the Caracas bullring, drawing a crowd of 60,000 by Tribuna Popular’s count.172 Against estimates that placed the number of party militants at 300 in January, even if 60,000 proved exaggerated, tens of thousands marked a dramatic improvement, though still a ways away from the party’s goal of 200,000 nationwide. A week later, on 4 December, a reported 250,000 gathered in downtown Caracas for the final act of Larrazábal’s campaign. Officially a URD rally, the PCV nevertheless also staked a claim of participation, this time sounding an independent note that spoke of a special relationship between urban popular sectors and the leaders they hoped to place in elected office. “The struggle will not end on 7 December,” noted


PCV leader Guillermo Garcia Ponce to the rally. “To the contrary, that’s when it will begin. Larrazábal must make good with the people, who have a perfect right to demand that promises made to them be kept.” In highlighting the responsibility of elected officials to remain responsive and of the electorate to continue holding officials accountable beyond elections, Ponce was helping to expose the kind of politics popular sectors had been practicing since 23 January, one marked by support of the underlying pillars of liberal democratic governance as expressed in support for the legitimately constituted government, while at the same time upholding organized street actions as a crucial form of accountability. It was a sentiment well captured in a cartoon published two days before the vote (see Figure 10). A man donning alpargatas (sandals) and patched up pants stands ready to vote. In one hand he holds his ballot, in the other, a rock. As a mischievous smile grips his face, the caption reads: “Yes, my ‘weapon’ is the vote, but don’t let the conspirators be fooled, I also know how to handle other weapons!”

Against the backdrop of a year in which popular sectors, especially in Caracas, and in particular in the 23 de enero, had shown themselves ready both to defend the promise of democracy and also press a fragile government to respond to their needs, the cartoon revealed much about their understanding of the way a democratic state would look.

As day dawned on 7 December, the climate was tense. A US Embassy dispatch sent to the State Department reported that after a “whirlwind” three week campaign,

officials expected “a close contest.” The specter of a coup loomed large, as did questions about the integrity of the vote and whether political leaders would honor their commitment to recognize the results. Above all the question remained: how would the people respond?

The Elections and their Aftermath

Lourdes Quintero was not new to elections, or to electoral uncertainty. “My first vote was during Pérez Jiménez,” she recalls, in a 2 December 1957 plebiscite in which the dictator fraudulently claimed victory. A year later, on 7 December 1958, Lourdes cast her first vote in a new, democratic Venezuela, at the Asunción Church in the Zona F, near the apartment in Block 37 she had squatted in on 23 January. Counting proceeded as had the voting, normally and in complete calm, a new triumph for democracy in Venezuela, but this time at the ballot box. By the evening, the totals for the Zona F spoke of an overwhelming victory for Wolfgang Larrazábal, who garnered 85 percent of 3,130 valid votes to Rómulo Betancourt’s 14 percent. It was an astounding margin mirrored to a lesser degree throughout Caracas, where Larrazábal won with 66 percent of the vote to Betancourt’s third place 12 percent and Rafael Caldera’s second place 18 percent. Among popular sectors in Caracas including the 23 de enero, Larrazábal had taken 70


175 Quintero.

percent. But in fact Larrazábal’s victory in the capital cut across class. Indeed it was a victory as decisive as was Betancourt’s loss. Without a doubt, Caracas was for Larrazábal; it cared little for Betancourt or AD, which ended not third but fourth in the Caracas balloting, behind URD, the PCV, and COPEI.

By Monday evening, however, it was clear that voting outside Caracas painted a far different picture. Betancourt, not Larrazábal, had scored a decisive victory, securing 49 percent of the total 2.7 million votes to Larrazábal’s 35 percent and Caldera’s 16 percent. As the Supreme Electoral Council moved formally to declare Betancourt President Elect, protests broke out in the capital, centered primarily in the city’s popular sectors. Stated a US Embassy dispatch: “the barrio, or slum area, people showed their resentment … by coming down the hills and storming along Avenida Bolívar and continuing into and around Plaza El Silencio, tearing down signs of Larrazábal’s opponents.” Police deployed throughout the downtown area used a “special type of bomb” to control the crowds, deploying tear gas guns that left one man hospitalized when a canister hit him at point blank range. All told, police made hundreds of arrests,

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177 In a class analysis of the Caracas electorate between 1958 and 1968, historians John Martz and Peter Harkins found that in sectors they identified as “upper” “middle” and “lower” class, respectively, in 1958 Larrazabal won withall three segments, while Betancourt lost with all three. John D. Martz and Peter B. Harkins, "Urban Electoral Behavior in Latin America: The Case of Metropolitan Caracas, 1958-1968," *Comparative Politics* 5, no. 4 (1973): 543.

178 "Aplastante Derrota De A.D. En El Distrito Federal, Pero En La Provincia Gana Ampliamente."


primarily of youth who comprised the bulk of the demonstrators\textsuperscript{181} and who found little support in the press which roundly castigated their actions as “anti-democratic,” “vandalistic,” and “immature,” urging all to accept the electoral results.\textsuperscript{182}

But while youth protests could be dismissed as immature, events in the 23 de enero threatened to explode into what the media called a “major scandal.” “I always remember that business with the boxes,” recalled Lourdes nearly fifty years later. “We went back to the voting station, out of curiosity. We were young then.”\textsuperscript{183} In fact, Lourdes had returned to the Asunción Church alongside thousands of other residents of the 23 de enero and nearby areas, after neighbors discovered twelve voting bins containing electoral materials on the surrounding hillside. Suspecting fraud, area residents flocked to the scene demanding answers from the local elections officials, who pleaded with them to understand the materials were, in fact, trash, unused ballots. Unsatisfied, neighbors struggled to gain entry to the polling station to verify for themselves, resulting in a scuffle. Later, a delegation comprised of police, electoral officials, and Carlos del Vecchio as representative for area residents took the materials in question to the Supreme Electoral Council for review. In the halls of the downtown office of the Council, a rumor spread that “the same people who were protesting in the 23 de enero were heading to the headquarters of the Council,” leading to the deployment of


\textsuperscript{183} Quintero.
soldiers to safeguard the area. Yet the news proved unfounded, as did the initial suspicion of fraud in the Zona F.184

In part, the tension reflected in the 23 de enero and more broadly gripping Caracas in the wake of the 7 December elections owed to the Electoral Council’s delay in announcing the results for the capital even as it declared Betancourt the nationwide winner. But it also highlighted a now undeniable divide, expressed not just demographically but also politically, between rural and urban populations, a divide that would challenge the new regime. This was a class-crossing schism. While press and foreign observers dismissed the pro-Larrazábal demonstrations as “riff raff” who had displayed “their failure to grasp the elemental concept of democratic electoral defeat,” such comments were belied by the fact that Larrazábal had won with the support of all social classes in Caracas. The protests also heralded more troubling preludes of future conflict facing the infant democracy, in particular, a degree of disproportional response to spontaneous street protest. Deploying “special” tear gas marked only one measure in the state’s new responsive repertoire. The interim government also quickly moved to suspend basic rights of speech and assembly in a bid to quell passions, placing the new authorities in the ironic position of suspending basic freedoms as the first act following

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184 "Escandalo En El 23 De Enero Ante Creencia De Un Fraude Electoral Al Encontrar 12 Urnas Con Material Sobrante Y Suponer Eran Votos."
the democratic revolution’s first elections.\textsuperscript{185} By 10 December, however, demonstrations had died out, and the process to suspend guarantees did not go forward.\textsuperscript{186}

More than a sudden awakening led to the protests’ demobilization. At the height of the demonstrations on the evening of 8 December, Larrazábal took to the airwaves at the behest of both electoral authorities and the interim government to speak directly to his supporters throughout Caracas and nationally, after thousands of them had congregated outside his home.\textsuperscript{187} Drawing on the same qualities of charisma and affective ties with the population for which he had earlier been decried, the young, former military officer delivered what US Embassy officials conceded was “an impressive short talk.” He “called on all Venezuelans to accept the outcome of the election and to support the elected President.” Furthermore, “he asked everyone to have faith and patience and to ponder the responsibility of each citizen to advance the example of democracy already demonstrated in Venezuela.” Wrote John Cates at the US Embassy, “It was generally felt that his impressive presentation was an outstanding contribution not only to public order but to the advancement of democracy in Venezuela. It was generally believed that his words had a calming effect and were responsible for encouraging many of the


\textsuperscript{187} “No Podemos Convertirmos En Unos Tumba Elecciones' Expreso Larrazabal a Manifestantes En Su Casa,” \textit{Ultimas Noticias}, 9 December 1958.
Ironically, then, in defeat, Larrazábal had secured more status than he had as president of the Junta, or as candidate for President. Yet not all proved ready to turn the page. The initial media attacks on demonstrators sparked a backlash among commentators more concerned with the broad-scale implications of the now evident schism between urban and rural electorates, and in particular between Caracas and the rest of Venezuela. In an editorial, Fabricio Ojeda, leader of the civilian wing of the movement that helped to oust Pérez Jiménez, blasted those referring to demonstrators as “lumpen proletariat, petty criminals [hampones], or prostitutes,” noting that “the people who have taken to the streets of Caracas to demonstrate their passion and warmth [cariño] for Larrazábal are the same who overthrew the dictatorship on 23 January.” Instead, Ojeda explained, it was precisely by demonstrating in the streets that popular sectors in Caracas had shown their “heroic democratic actions, political maturity, and revolutionary spirit.” Indeed their vote for Larrazábal had marked not personalist populism, but the “reaffirmation of the political capacity of [the people of Caracas], in demonstrating that the strongest force for constitutional stability resides in the election of an extra-partisan president who can consolidate the civil-military union that on 23 January overthrew tyranny and in July and September boldly defended democracy and the rule of law.”

For Ojeda, their street politics indicated that “whoever governs Venezuela will have to do it within a new

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conception of power.” Meanwhile, Communist journalist Servando Garcia Ponce likewise sprung to the defense of demonstrators. Rejecting the most extreme expressions of discontent – “explosions of violence, destruction of AD and COPEI propaganda, persecution of AD militants, attempts to loot party offices” – as an “ugly spectacle not worthy of … that people who made possible 23 January,” he also castigated the “insults” to which they had been subjected by commentators. “Probably elements of poor standing may have infiltrated the demonstrators. But in the majority they are from La Charneca and the 23 de enero … the same ones I saw ward off the fascist Castro León and secure democracy, generously spilling their blood in front of the Palacio Blanco.”

Communists’ defense of demonstrators reflected more than ongoing support for their presidential candidate, Larrazábal. As shown above, the PCV’s support of Larrazábal largely owed to opportunism as the party sought to secure an electoral base during the democratic transition. Instead, that Communists flocked to the defense of urban sectors protesting election results on the streets reflected in part a sense of gratitude to a population that had placed much confidence, and many votes, in the PCV. In fact, on 7 December the PCV did achieve significant gains. In the presidential vote, the party fell considerably short of its hoped for 200,000; only 84,000 voted for the PCV’s presidential option. However, in the congressional vote, which ran concurrently, the PCV garnered 160,000 votes nationwide, enough to give the party two senators and seven congresspersons, well within its pre-election goals. Reflecting the reach of its urban

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strategy, 71,000 of the PCV’s nationwide total votes, or 44 percent, came in Caracas alone. Among popular sectors, including the 23 de enero, the PCV emerged as the solid second party of choice, securing 18 percent of the vote to AD’s 14, COPEI’s 13, and URD’s 46 percent. Among the delegates going to Congress on the PCV ticket was Eloy Torres of the La Cañada sector of the 23 de enero.

The dramatic electoral split between Caracas and the rest of Venezuela was lost on few and became the subject of intense analysis. In a post-electoral review of the PCV’s strong showing in the capital, US Embassy officials reported, based on interviews with Betancourt and other AD leaders, how they had been “frankly surprised at their poor showing in Caracas,” attributing their failure primarily to the decision by AD leaders to entrust the party’s capital city organizing efforts to youth rather than party cadres. Other analysts considered that Communists in Caracas benefitted from a popular perception that “as the ‘outs’ [they] are looked upon by many persons as being outspoken and independent on local issues,” confirming the PCV’s success in claiming autonomy despite their support of Larrazábal. In part, as embassy analysts reported, the PCV’s outreach efforts to urban popular sectors had yielded fruit, in particular in the 23 de enero. “The Communists … had established simple club houses in these areas, offering recreation and a minimum of political doctrine.” In the end, however, Larrazábal’s personal appeal to urban working classes, reflected in direct promises, had carried the day.

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in Caracas, for instance, by “offering to forgive the past year’s rental payments due for occupancy of the superblocks, workers’ apartments – a sure-fire voter appeal.”

Among popular sectors, too, concern regarding governability in a country so deeply split between urban and rural electorates surfaced. US Embassy First Secretary John Cates, present outside Miraflores when protests broke out on 8 December, reported how among the crowd some “asked how if Betancourt lost in Caracas, he could govern here.” Betancourt himself, in meetings with the US Ambassador, sought to downplay the divide, noting that “he did not feel at all hopeless about it … The great majority Larrazábal had received in Caracas represented a pro-Larrazábal vote but not necessarily an anti-AD vote.” Still, Betancourt remained “very cognizant of the problems in Caracas, as well as the popular devotion to Larrazábal as a democratic symbol,” furthermore sketching out a plan directly to attend to concerns regarding employment and poverty and in so doing “swing much of the popular sentiment towards him and his party.” But if Embassy personnel showed public support for Betancourt’s optimism, it was betrayed in private correspondence. In a 31 December dispatch, Cates bluntly wrote to the State Department: “Caracas may be a problem for Betancourt… AD leaders are aware that one of their primary problems will be to establish party control in Caracas and for the

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192 John M. Cates, "Venezuelan 1958 Election: Phenomenon of the Communist Congressional Vote Exceeding the Communist Presidential Vote," RG59/Central Decimal File, Box 3033/Folder 731.00/1-259, 8 January 1959.

193 Cates, "Venezuelan Elections 1958."

immediate present to assure that the city will be in a mood to accept Betancourt’s
inauguration publicly and even with enthusiasm.”

It was not to be. Against a backdrop of continuing tension in Caracas, the
following day in Havana Fulgencio Batista resigned as President of Cuba and fled to the
United States ahead of a now certain victory for a once ragtag band of mountain rebels
led by Fidel Castro. In the ensuing days, events in Cuba would rekindle the promise of
revolution that a year earlier had captured the imagination of Venezuelans, in particular
in the 23 de enero. As the neighborhood approached the one year anniversary of
Venezuela’s own democratic revolution, celebrations to commemorate its namesake
dovetailed with excitement about events in Cuba. On 12 January, residents of the 23 de
enero reportedly dispatched a note to Castro via a Venezuelan press delegation headed to
Cuba, inviting the former rebel to headline activities planned for 23 January 1959.

When Castro arrived in Caracas just after 1 PM on the 23rd, it marked his first foreign
travel since taking power in Cuba. In the capital, officials declared Castro one of
Caracas’s “favored sons.” Political leaders of all stripes jockeyed to meet with the
“revolutionary leader,” including members of the interim government’s cabinet who
hosted Castro for lunch also attended by “intellectuals, political party leaders, and
journalists.” And in the evening as he addressed a crowd of hundreds of thousands in

196 “Fidel Castro Invitado Por Urbanizacion 23 De Enero.”
197 “Hijo Predilecto De Caracas' Fue Declarado El Heroe Fidel Castro Al Llegar a Venezuela.”
198 “El Gabinete Ejecutivo Brindo Un Almuerzo Al Lider Revolucionario,” Ultimas Noticias, 25 January
1959.

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downtown Caracas, Castro drew upon a theme to which he would again and again return throughout his stay, linking the two nations in a common identity: “Cuba and Venezuela,” he told the jubilant crowd, “are united in the ideals of liberty and democracy.”

But while on the surface Castro’s visit appeared to reunite Venezuelans in a renewed spirit of revolution, in fact the opposite was true. As he spoke on the evening of 23 January, newspapers reported how the crowd below jeered at each mention of President-elect Betancourt, illustrating the continuing rift between capital city dwellers and the AD leader. Their reaction also gave sense of the kind of “problem” that Caracas would pose to the Betancourt government, as US embassy officials had warned. The following day, as he spoke to Congress celebrating Venezuela’s revolution as the prelude to Cuba’s revolution, an unidentified voice cried out from the gallery: “we haven’t had a revolution here!” And in the evening, while addressing college students as well as a visiting Pablo Neruda at the Universidad Central de Venezuela, Castro once again faced jeers at the mention of Venezuela’s just elected President. By January 25, these multiple expressions of contempt for Betancourt unleashed by Castro’s visit prompted public officials to mount a rebuke through the press, with AD and COPEI congressmen in particular “condemning provocations against unity in public acts.”


200 "La Evidente Falta De Civismo."

Their pleas notwithstanding, tensions revealing the gulf between incoming authorities and the Caracas electorate would only accentuate as editorial writers in the press aligned with AD and COPEI blamed Wolfgang Larrazábal’s presence more than Castro for stirring the passions of the crowds during the 23 January festivities. In particular Luis Herrera Campins, an up and coming figure in COPEI who had just won a seat to the Deputies Chamber of Congress, spearheaded press critiques of the former Junta President. Responding to the accusations, the military high command moved to quell rumors that a censure of Larrazábal was forthcoming, while nevertheless holding open the possibility of an inquiry into his participation in the rally for “violating express dispositions in the Military Code of Justice” barring military officers from participating in political acts without permission.²⁰² By 28 January, however, after a meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Minister of Defense Josué López Henríquez announced that Larrazábal had not engaged in any violation, as the 23 January rally had been “patriotic – not political.”²⁰³ Still, that Larrazábal had faced scrutiny in the first place only heightened the political tension in the days following Castro’s visit. Alirio Gómez, one of the architects of the civilian Junta Patriótica that had helped bring down Pérez Jiménez, wondered in an editorial what underlay the “attacks” against Larrazábal.²⁰⁴ Others like Luis Peraza went further, suggesting critiques of Larrazábal owed to a plot to

²⁰² "’Nada Se Ha Considerado Sobre Sancion a Wolfgang’,” Ultimas Noticias, 26 January 1959.


neutralize the former Junta president politically in light of the continuing fissures revealed during Castro’s visit.

Just as commentators speculated about the political meaning of attacks on Larrazábal, the lingering grievances of Caracas popular sectors exploded into open protest. On 28 January, just two days after Castro departed Venezuela, hundreds of unemployed workers confronted military guards and police outside the Miraflores Presidential Palace, demanding jobs from the Junta government. Despite one arrest and reports that police fired tear gas on protesters – later proven false – the protest ended peacefully after a workers’ delegation met with Junta government authorities and received assurances of employment. Four days later, however, on 31 January, a reported 3000 workers returned to Miraflores to demand the Junta uphold its promise. According to press reports, when workers attempted to reach the Presidential Palace police and Palace guards blocked their path, resulting in clashes that quickly escalated. For several hours workers paralyzed traffic while police fired tear gas in a bid to disperse the crowd. Meanwhile Junta authorities called trade union leaders to Miraflores for a series of “urgent conferences,” also asking them to intercede with workers outside. By late afternoon, Junta President Edgar Sanabria released a statement promising 10,000 jobs by

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Monday 2 January. Press accounts later placed the number of injured at five, and the number of cars set ablaze at seven.

The violent episode of 31 January, just two weeks before Betancourt’s inauguration, sent the Junta government into a panic. Vowing that “public order will not be altered by coup plotting groups advancing a subversive campaign,” Minister of Defense Hernández announced measures including the prohibition of unauthorized protests and a redoubling of patrols in Caracas. These measures, and their spokesman, reflected a paradoxical scenario as Venezuela’s first democratically elected government in a decade prepared to take office, one where the fruits of a democratic revolution that ousted a military dictator a year earlier clashed with a crackdown on protests announced not by the civilian Minister of Interior, but by the military Minister of Defense. In pointing to a “subversive” threat undergirding protests of unemployed workers, Junta authorities likewise were pointing to the underlying political tensions reflected in the very real schism between Caracas’s electorate and the incoming government, acknowledging its potential power.

Indeed, political leaders representing the incoming administration – AD, COPEI, and URD – moved quickly to back the Junta’s measures. President-elect Betancourt told reporters he was “absolutely in agreement with the measures taken to guarantee order,”

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furthermore noting that “the exercise of liberties cannot be confused with bochinche [troublemaking].” COPEI’s Luis Herrera Campins echoed Betancourt. “The democratic system,” he noted in an editorial, “needs in order to consolidate and take root the ordered behavior of el pueblo,” and in particular, the people of Caracas where “a feverish agitation rattles the nervous system of [its] inhabitants.” In referring to the “indispensable order” required of Venezuelans hoping to call themselves democratic, Herrera Campins was defining the boundaries of democratic citizenship within a context of transition. Communist Servando Garcia Ponce likewise called on residents of Caracas, “despite … losing the elections for President of the Republic, [to] reconquer its deanship in the political and civilist direction of the country,” which was “only possible by preserving serenity and above all consolidate the triumphs gained in various mass actions.” Meanwhile Fabricio Ojeda, speaking on behalf of URD, tried to strike a balance between supporting measures taken to safeguard order while condemning their reach into “demonstrations of popular will.”

While political parties united behind the need to create a climate of stability ahead of Betancourt’s inauguration – even if it meant clamping down on protest – the only figure that could plausible claim to help assuage the rift between the Caracas electorate


and the incoming government remained Larrazábal. On 6 February, Larrázabal met with
President-elect Betancourt. On leaving, he announced his support for the measures
announced by the Junta, stating “The more precautions the better so that the people can
have the government it elected.” It was a remarkable statement, a second concession of
sorts by the former candidate who had overwhelmingly carried Caracas to those outside
Caracas who had favored Betancourt. But Larrazábal went further. Days earlier, just as
the military high command cleared Larrazábal of any wrongdoing for participating in the
23 January rally, Betancourt announced that he had named the man who defeated him in
the capital ambassador to Chile. The announcement set off a whirlwind of speculation
among those who had suggested that incoming authorities were in fact seeking to
marginalize Larrazábal.²¹⁴ To what extent this is the case remains unclear, and Larrazábal
predictably denied charges that he had been forced into the position. But on 11 February,
on the eve of Betancourts’s 13 February inauguration, Larrazábal boarded a ship en route
to Chile, where he would remain as ambassador for ten years. As he left, he sounded a
warning: “Those who invoke my name to foment disturbances are not my friends and I
am not with them.”²¹⁵ Two days later, with Larrazábal en route to the southern cone,
Rómulo Betancourt assumed the presidency of Venezuela; to what extent he would be
able to rule in Caracas remained a question.

²¹⁴ “Larrazabal Apoya Las Medidas De Seguridad; Anoche Se Despidio Del Presidente Electo,” Ultimas
Noticias, 7 February 1959.

²¹⁵ “Los Que Invocan Mi Nombre Para Fomentar Disturbios Y Alterar El Orden No Son Mis Amigos Ni
Estoy Con Ellos,” Ultimas Noticias, 12 February 1959.
In particular the *23 de enero* – where Larrazábal had secured over 70 percent of the vote – would remain a site of contradictions for Betancourt – who had barely garnered double digit support. At once the “Bastion of Democracy,” as *Tribuna Popular* referred to the neighborhood in a March 1959 story recounting residents’ efforts to secure fair rents, and also decidedly oppositional in their electoral orientation, residents of the *23 de enero* would come to embody the problems of a budding democratic regime faced with an urban electorate very much in its antagonist. Over the years, the tensions that manifested themselves through 1958, coupled with residents’s organizing abilities and their privileged place in the national symbolic and spatial imaginary, would occasion not just street protest but all out war. As the *Tribuna* story noted, for some the continuing schism would be reflected in the question: “Where is the democracy we conquered?”216

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Chapter Three

From Radicalism to Community Action: Insurgent Defeat and the Allure of Participation

In March 1969 COPEI’s Rafael Caldera took office after a stunning electoral victory over Acción Democrática (AD) three months earlier. Indeed since the overthrow of General Marcos Pérez Jiménez on 23 January 1958 set Venezuela on a path towards democracy, AD had cemented itself as Venezuela’s major political party, winning the presidency in December 1958 and again in 1963 while in the process contending against guerrilla insurgency, factional splintering, and economic recession. Caldera’s victory and subsequent inauguration marked the first peaceful transfer of power from a dominant party to its main opposition in Venezuelan history. It also signaled Venezuela’s consolidation as a stable multiparty democracy, shepherded by an enlightened political elite and the system of inter-institutional, inter-party pacts they had crafted precisely for this pivotal moment. That Caldera had won with a plurality of the vote, edging AD by mere tenths of a point, seemed only to confirm the resiliency of Venezuelan institutions and their broad based popular support expressed in confidence over electoral results. That he had made pacification with guerrillas and legalization of the Communist Party – outlawed by AD in 1962 – bedrocks of his campaign seemed, especially coming from a candidate of Christian Democracy, final proof that Venezuela had turned the corner from transition to consolidation. In short, a decade after the fall of military dictatorship,

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analysts and observers alike agreed, Venezuelans had shown their political maturity, accepting the primacy of electoral democracy, the alternation in power that it invariably promised, and the two main parties that had surfaced from the fray of political options to lead their country in a new decade.²

But while Caldera’s inauguration spoke of a turning point, a political drama unfolding at the margins planted doubts about the direction that turn might take. Pérez Jiménez, erstwhile dictator, had also scored a stunning electoral victory as the leader in exile of Cruzada Cívica Nacionalista (Nationalist Civic Crusade, CCN), claiming a seat in the senate.³ To win Pérez Jiménez had relied on electoral support in Caracas, where CCN beat both AD and COPEI in congressional elections.⁴ In response, Attorney General Antonio José Lozada filed a brief on 7 February in the Supreme Court seeking to

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² Wrote political scientist Daniel Levine in 1973: “The 1968 elections marked the first time power had ever been handed over to an opposition party – with a plurality of barely 30,000 votes out of almost 4 million ballots cast. [Venezuela] has one of the longest and bloodiest histories of military dictatorship in Latin America, and yet has spawned a powerful, highly organized, and far reaching system of mass political parties – a system with few parallels in the region.” Levine, Conflict and Political Change in Venezuela, 3.

³ CCN had been formed in 1966 as a vehicle for Pérez Jiménez to secure representation in the new government, and receive parliamentary immunity, while imprisoned from May 1964 to August 1968. “Iniciado Ayer Proceso De Legalizacion De ‘Cruzada Cívica Nacionalista’,” Últimas Noticias, 19 January 1966. Though formally legalized as a party, CCN was barred from presenting Pérez Jiménez as a presidential candidate. However, CCN was permitted to present candidates for Congress. In 1968, 42 percent of the CCN’s total nationwide vote of 400,000 was cast in Caracas. And of CCN voters in Caracas, most were among working classes, who voted 27.6 percent for Pérez Jiménez’s party. Data compiled from: C.S.E., Las Cuatro Primeras Fuerzas Políticas En Venezuela a Nivel Municipal, 1958-1978, ed. División de Estadística (Caracas: Consejo Supremo Electoral, 1983).

⁴ Examining presidential and congressional voting patterns in Caracas for the first decade of democratic governance, political scientists John Martz and Peter Harkins concluded that the latter represented “a truer indication of political tendency than [did] the vote for president, which [was] considerably more subject to the influence of personality.” Martz and Harkins, “Urban Electoral Behavior in Latin America: The Case of Metropolitan Caracas, 1958-1968.” Accordingly, this chapter draws from congressional vote results as a more accurate gauge of local voting tendencies than national electoral tallies. For congressional vote statistics by parish, see: C.N.E., Las Cuatro Primeras Fuerzas Políticas En Venezuela a Nivel Municipal, 1958-1978, ed. División de Estadística (Caracas: Consejo Supremo Electoral, 1983), 19.
invalidate Pérez Jiménez’s victory.\(^5\) Two months later on 9 April, the Court ruled in favor of Lozada and annulled Pérez Jiménez’s win on grounds he had failed to register to vote – compulsory in Venezuela – and thus had forfeited his right to vie for elected office.\(^6\) Over the next several days Pérez Jiménez supporters staged protests outside the Court and in public squares proclaiming that the decision slighted the “votes of the people” who voted for CCN.\(^7\) Among political elites opinions split. AD hailed the decision for having defined the right to vote, while COPEI called it “absurd” because the Court had encroached upon Congress’s prerogative to determine its membership. Meanwhile the Communist Party warned that “they [AD] have turned [Pérez Jiménez] into a martyr, a persecuted man, a good man.”\(^8\) And from Lima, Pérez Jiménez himself blasted the decision as a “political maneuver” by his political adversaries in the Court, namely those judges identified with AD which he branded as “my irreconcilable enemy.”\(^9\) Targeting the pillar of democratic governance, he concluded: “Three or four


\(^8\) Party opinions were set forth by David Morales Bello (AD), Luis Guillermo anduela (COPEI), and Eduardo Machado (PCV). Carlos Villegas, "Divididas Las Opiniones De Dirigentes Politicos Sobre Fallo Que Anula Eleccion De Perez Jimenez," *Ultimas Noticias*, 10 April 1969.

judges] have invalidated the will of 160,000 voters who cast ballots for me in Caracas.”

Caldera’s inauguration notwithstanding, the disjointed response to Pérez Jiménez’s victory set in relief the still-tenuous nature Venezuela’s democracy ten years into its founding. For analysts Pérez Jiménez’s strong showing in Caracas reeked of misguided wistfulness. Wrote political scientists John Martz and Peter Harkins, “one can only speculate that lower-class recollections of the mid-50s boom led some to a nostalgic if seriously flawed memory of ‘the good old days” economically.” Fears of turning Pérez Jiménez into a martyr, added to discontent by some about institutional overreach, revealed a latent insecurity about how solid the foundations of Venezuelan democracy in fact remained. But what Pérez Jiménez’s victory unquestionably reflected was a deep contradiction facing Venezuelan democracy as it consolidated, namely, a lingering split between the Caracas and national electorate.

Even as Caldera won the presidency, he lost in Caracas to Jóvito Villalba of Union Republicana Democratica (Democratic Republican Union, URD). In congressional voting COPEI’s loss in Caracas was more significant still, sliding to third

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10 Carlos Castillo, “Tres O Cuatro Han Anulado La Voluntad De 160 Mil Electores Que Votaron Por Mi: Expreso El General Perez Jimenez Ayer Al Conocer La Nulidad De Eleccion,” Ultimas Noticias, 10 April 1969.


12 URD’s candidate Burelli Rivas edged out Caldera 27.3 to 27.2 percent in Caracas, although among the working class vote – including the 23 de enero – the margin was larger, 28.5 to 24.3 percent, respectively. Ibid.: 543.
behind both URD and Pérez Jiménez’s CCN. That Caldera had failed to win in Caracas reflected a pattern begun in 1958, when AD, too, had lost in Caracas while nevertheless claiming the presidency; in 1963 it would lose Caracas again. AD and COPEI’s inability to secure constituencies in Caracas – the seat of power and comprising nearly 20 percent of the national vote – well exposed how the two parties emerging as Venezuela’s main political brokers had failed to respond to an increasingly urban electorate during the years of democratic transition. According to later studies of COPEI, as late as 1968 the party remained identified with “rural and small town middle classes.” Meanwhile AD’s base had long since been solidified among labor unions and a rapidly dwindling peasantry, reflecting the party’s origins in the 1930s and 40s when Venezuela remained a largely rural nation. While in power during the 1960s, AD had decidedly reoriented public works policy from a focus on Caracas under Pérez Jiménez to development projects beyond the capital, thus cementing its status as a party whose power lay outside Caracas. Ten years after its founding, then, Venezuelan democracy remained fraught by an uneasy relationship between the state and its primary concentration of voters, the urban electorate in Caracas.

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13 Ibid.: 541.
This chapter examines the continuing tensions underpinning Venezuelan political life as it transitioned from an era of armed conflict in the 1960s, to a period of “fragile” consolidation in the early 1970s, as they played out both in the ballot box and in the streets of the 23 de enero.\textsuperscript{17} Indeed, as one of the most populous working class neighborhoods in Caracas, the 23 de enero neighborhood entered the 1968 elections well reflecting this peculiar relationship between support for the electoral system expressed in voting, but continuing rejection of the parties then emerging as Venezuela’s most powerful. Founded by Pérez Jiménez as a showcase of his efforts at modernizing Venezuela, the neighborhood nevertheless figured prominently in his ouster as its residents took to the streets to lend popular legitimacy to the coup that removed him from power. Ten years later they would flock to Pérez Jiménez’s CCN, relegating the eventual winner COPEI to fourth in the polls in congressional voting.\textsuperscript{18} To be sure, “nostalgia” for a period when they figured prominently in the state’s plans for Venezuela partly accounted for their embrace of Pérez Jiménez. But such romanticism was forged against the backdrop of what emerged as a contentious relationship with the democratic regime in the intervening ten years. Though renamed 23 de enero to reflect the founding date of the new democracy, the neighborhood would nevertheless emerge as a hotbed of heterogeneous opposition to the budding regime. Most expressed this opposition at the ballot box, again and again rejecting AD and COPEI. Others voiced their rejection more

\textsuperscript{17} Levine, \textit{Conflict and Political Change in Venezuela}, 258.

\textsuperscript{18} In \textit{the 23 de enero}, COPEI slipped behind not just AD and the CCN, but also the Movimiento Electoral del Pueblo (People’s Electoral Movement, MEP), a left wing AD splinter group. C.S.E., \textit{Las Cuatro Primeras Fuerzas Políticas En Venezuela a Nivel Municipal, 1958-1978}.
violently, through armed conflict seeking to oust the budding political system. These multiple expressions of political action would continue to inform residents’ eventual acceptance of the AD-COPEI regime in the 1970s.

**The Ambiguous Politics of Radicalism, 1960s**

In the wake of Pérez Jiménez’s ouster, political elites sought to consolidate democratic order by opening spaces for dissent but under carefully crafted rules of consensus building. Moving away from the zero-sum politics that had doomed earlier efforts at democratization, political, military, clerical, and labor leaders agreed to what Fernando Coronil has referred to as an “agreement to make pacts,” steering economic and political incentives to opposition seen as legitimate through a well-oiled institutional apparatus. Meanwhile opposition considered illegitimate faced marginalization and punishment. The result was a system highly efficient at managing conflict from within but highly inefficient at handling conflict from without, resulting in party splits and guerrilla conflict that would shape Venezuela’s political landscape for much of the 1960s.

In the 23 de enero, the tension between conflict and consensus that underlay Venezuela’s political system during the years of democratic transition would find expression in a seeming paradox: while electoral support increased for the nascent democratic regime, violent opposition also found a strong and lasting base. The roots of this tension lay in what residents recall as the National Guard’s “occupation” during the government of Rómulo Betancourt (1958-63), which would gave shape to an undercurrent of radical political action in the neighborhood. The occupation responded to urban guerrilla activity during the transition to democracy, creating a climate of intense
conflict in the 23 de enero. Period headlines give sense of the violence: “The 23 de enero … gunned down,” “1500 National Guardsmen and Political Police Agents Assault the 23 de enero,” “Unrest all day in the 23 de enero: 6 dead, 40 wounded,” “Disorder in the 23 de enero…”

Drawn from October 1960, these headlines speak to events that had begun months earlier with the gradual splintering of the ruling coalition between URD, COPEI, and AD. Disenchanted with the party’s leadership, youth sectors of AD split the party and created the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (Leftist Revolutionary Movement, MIR). Meanwhile URD had declared itself in opposition to the Betancourt government on the basis of disagreements about provisions in the Constitution then being drafted. Meanwhile the Communist Party (PCV) – which had been excluded altogether from the powersharing pact of 1958 – had long staked an oppositional agenda from within the ranks of its congressional delegation. The tension reached its climax in mid October when protests of unemployed sectors of the Caracas population unleashed a wave of looting in the capital. Betancourt’s government responded by deploying Army troops to the streets of Caracas, calling the protests a threat against the state. Nominally aimed at stemming the unrest, the government’s reaction, as well as the unrest itself, in fact illustrated a widening of the schism first laid bare in the 1958 elections that brought Betancourt to power. To counteract the wave of urban unrest in October 1960, Betancourt’s AD

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government mobilized not only Army troops but also the rural peasantry on which it had relied to win elections in 1958. Calling it the “conquest of Caracas,” AD organized a rally that brought a reported 250,000 peasants into the streets of the capital in order to “offer support to the constitutional regime.”

Meanwhile the PCV, which had staked its hopes of securing political relevance by courting urban electors in 1958, quickly picked up on the language of rural-urban tension. In the wake of the AD rally, the party’s publication, *Tribuna Popular*, directly appealed for unity among “peasants and the people of Caracas” in order to stem the government’s effort at splitting the “masses of Venezuela.”

By 1962, interparty conflict exploded into open war as sectors within MIR and PCV decided to seek state power through armed conflict, resulting in the illegalization of both. Meanwhile Caracas and in particular areas like the 23 de enero became hotbeds of a multipronged insurgent strategy to draw on both urban and rural sectors in their conflict against the state. Because it was set against the backdrop of the consolidation of democracy, the militarization of a neighborhood sector ironically named after democracy’s founding date seemed all the more striking. Indeed, these contradictions and the violence that characterized them were not lost on residents, even among those who professed partisanship to the parties then in power, AD and COPEI, respectively. One

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AD militant heavily criticized Betancourt and the difficulties his administration’s record in the 23 de enero created in the campaign for his eventual successor.22

Against this backdrop, Venezuelans readied to vote in a new round of elections in December 1963. Guerrillas cast the election, and what they hoped would be a significant support for their calls to boycott the vote, as a referendum on the direction democracy had taken since 1959. But on Election Day mass participation characterized the vote. Observers and political elites alike interpreted the defeat of guerrilla calls to boycott the election as a success for their brand of democracy, especially when it was Betancourt’s AD successor, Raúl Leoni, who emerged as winner. But a closer look at the results in fact showed a continuing rejection among urban popular sectors of the AD-COPEI coalition. In the 23 de enero, voters once again supported Larrazábal, this time running as candidate of the upstart Frente Democratico Electoral (Democratic Electoral Front, FDP) party. (see Table 1). AD and COPEI combined to lose seven percent of the vote as compared to their totals in 1958, bringing their electoral presence in the neighborhood to 17 percent. COPEI itself, again fielding Rafael Caldera as president, dropped to fifth in the polls. How can we read, then, the simultaneous rejection of both armed conflict expressed in mass participation, and of AD-COPEI? What accounts for this apparent contradiction, and how deep did popular support for representative democracy and its leading parties run in practice?

Testimonies offer partial answers. First, as the 1960s insurgency settled into stalemate after any real chance of victory crumbled by mid-decade, popular support faded

22 Ramón López, Interview with author, 15 February 2005.
for radical leftism while it increased for the bipartisan system. Electoral statistics, insurgent leader memoirs, and institutional analyses of Venezuela’s party system sustain this long-held view in the literature. But local testimonies offer new insight into the troubled context in which this process took place at the base, suggesting that just correlating the unfeasibility of guerrillas’ military objectives with waning urban popular support offers an incomplete view. For example, AD militants in the 23 de enero point to a kind of pathological aversion to communism in barrios. Ramon López, an AD militant since the 1940s and among the first residents of the 2 de diciembre neighborhood, notes that “AD always had more support than the communists. No one liked the communists. Do you know why no one like them, why the people never liked the communists? …

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23 Explanations for the demise of armed struggle in Venezuela have come primarily from the leadership cadre of the 1960s guerrilla movement. The earliest attempt came from Teodoro Petkoff, who identified Bhrzeznev’s invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 as the critical juncture in global socialist thought, marking a break between Dubcek’s humanist socialism and neo-Stalinism. In this context, socialism in Venezuela – though it remained a goal – would not be achieved by imposition but through electoral means, although whether or not the Prague Spring and its end proved to be a fitting pretext or an intellectual fine-tuning leading to surrender of armed struggle by Venezuelan cadres remains an open question. Teodoro Petkoff, Socialismo Para Venezuela? (Caracas: Editorial Domingo Fuentes, 1970). Later in the seventies, following the 1973 electoral defeat of the leftist option as represented by demobilized guerrillas grouped into the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) party, Petkoff broached the issue again in an impassioned defense of the decision to surrender armed struggle from attacks by factions within the Venezuelan left who sought to overtake MAS as the main socialist electoral option. Teodoro Petkoff, Proceso a La Izquierda, O De La Falsa Conducta Revolucionaria (Barcelona: Editorial Planeta, 1976). Ellner, Venezuela’s Movimiento Al Socialismo: From Guerrilla Defeat to Innovative Politics. Toward the end of the 1970s, previous guerrilla leaders were openly calling for an end to intellectual justifications for demobilization and instead, in a confessional tone, for acknowledgement of the “mistake” represented by their decision to pursue armed struggle in the first place. UPI, "Un Ex-Guerrillero Que Abandono La Clandestinidad Para Hacer Politica," Ultimas Noticias, 15 August 1977. By the early 1980s, consensus among previous guerrilla leaders was reached on the tactical error represented by armed struggle. In this context, a wave of oral histories emerged to narrate no longer the intellectual merits or faults of Venezuela’s guerrilla conflict, but its tactical details. Guillermo García Ponce, Relatos De La Lucha Armada: 1960-67 (Valencia: Vadell Hnos., 1977). Domingo Alberto Rangel and Agustin Blanco Muñoz, La Lucha Armada: La Izquierda Revolucionaria Insurge (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela-FACES, 1981). Domingo Alberto Rangel, "Nuestras Guerrillas De Los Años Sesenta Fracasaron Porque Eran Solo Un Detonante Para Un Golpe " Ultimas Noticias, 26 August 1990.
because they have that vision, of communism, what they do is kill people to take over their stuff, that’s a vision that’s been created, from Russia to Venezuela.”

Yet this political-culture analysis underestimates the lasting influence of Communist Party (PCV) organizing against the dictatorship among urban popular sectors like those resettled in the 23 de enero. Indeed despite its exclusion from the pacted system that shaped representative democracy after 1958, the PCV was well represented in the Caracas congressional delegation elected that year, including one envoy – Eloy Torres – from the 23 de enero, who in 1962 would go on to participate in a failed coup against the government of Rómulo Betancourt. Through its weekly organ, Tribuna Popular, the PCV also targeted the 23 de enero as a source of support, publishing a weekly column under the title “En el 23” about social and political goings-on in the neighborhood throughout 1958 and 1959. In 1960 it expanded its column to include all barrios of Caracas. Between 1962 and 1969 Tribuna Popular was banned as part of the counter-insurgency campaign waged during the administration of Raul Leóni (AD). When it was again legalized, Tribuna Popular continued its column on the 23 de enero, this time under the title “Tribuna del 23.” Meanwhile Eloy Torres and his wife Carmen would continue to participate prominently in the social and political life of Venezuela in general and their neighborhood in particular. While Eloy would go on to help found the

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24 López.


Movimiento al Socialismo party in 1971, Carmen dedicated herself to bringing material benefits to the 23 de enero in the form of health centers and forming women’s action committees to solicit gas and telephone service.  

Torres’s partisan affiliation let slip another problem with a strict political-culture analysis applied in the 23 de enero. Grouping 1960s guerrilla movements as Communist overlooks the insurgency’s ideological fault lines, which were linked under a socialist banner that proved too tenuous to assimilate the state’s increasingly effective military campaigns. What complicated the picture was the high representation of disenchanted AD militants in the ranks of the insurgency. In fact, it was generational and ideological fissures within AD that fueled three well-documented splits in the party between 1958 and 1968. Each break led to creation of new, more militant factions that promoted guerrilla warfare against a system by which they felt betrayed as socialists. In this context, while all insurgents believed that the social democracy Betancourt promoted after 1958 was neither socialist nor democratic, their struggle was marked more by doctrinal debates regarding the contours of real democratic socialism than by plotting the task of wresting political power in the soviet or Cuban style. The result was a series of internal fractures in which the PCV constituted only one factor among many, more often lending a voice of criticism than of support to guerrilla warfare. In this context, residents of the 23 de enero were more likely to view insurgent actions in their community as strands of student protest movements than as Communist take-over campaigns.

Seen as students rather than hardened political partisans, insurgents in the 23 de enero often benefited from a maternal kind of support at times expressed as women lent their homes as impromptu safe houses or makeshift infirmaries. Consider the following testimony from Lourdes Quintero, at the time a mother of two toddlers in Block 37 in the Zona F. Recalling armed clashes in the early days of the insurgency, Mrs. Quintero noted how:

LV: One time the police were chasing some kids, students, coming up [the stairs] with crates full of bombs. We opened the door [and said], “leave those bombs here and keep on running.”
AV: They came in?
LQ: Yes, we opened the door … they were running, yelling “Help us! Help us! Help us!” And we opened the door, and they left a crate here and then we threw it down the chute, all bombs. There were many, la pelea era brava (the fighting was tough)…

To be sure, it is difficult to glean the extent to which these forms of seemingly spontaneous support reflected broader ideological affinities. In the case of Mrs. Quintero’s testimony, however, what emerges is a pattern of material aid for the insurgency that seemed to reflect. Recalling another instance, Mrs. Quintero notes:

AV: But did you sympathize with the students? That is, did you understand them?
LQ: Well, it’s not that we understood them, but we helped them.
AV: How did you help them?
LQ: For instance one time a kid burned his back with a bomb, because when he threw it it fell on his back. Two kids brought him here, we kept him, treated him, well, we helped them, we gave them water, and food, and whatever we could. They were going around hurling … and this was full of students, but I don’t remember for what purpose, why, how it all started. I know it was during the government of Betancourt, very tough.
AV: Were the students communist?
LQ: Apparently. They came here for that. They came from below for that. Downstairs it was full of tanks.
AV: And were there many soldiers or police?
LQ: Many military, not police, military.
AV: And did you have to help a lot people?
LQ: Yes of course, everyone around here helped the students.
AV: So the people in the building helped?
LQ: Of course, they were young kids, students.
AV: And were there people who did not want them here?
LQ: No, everyone lent a hand, some didn’t because they were afraid, but others did, we helped them a lot, because they were young students.29

Accordingly what testimonies suggest is that behind the waning urban popular support for 1960s insurgent movements, or behind rising acceptance of representative democracy, lay more quotidian concerns regarding violence and the attendant difficulties it posed for everyday life. In the 23 de enero these concerns gave rise to at least three political choices: 1) participation in national elections as a form of voto castigo (punishment vote) against radical leftism; 2) participation in national elections to reject leftist political parties born in the wake of pacification – an early 1970s policy of granting amnesty to demobilized guerrillas in order to incorporate into the political system – considered tautologically as vendidos (sell outs) for acceding to the plan or “the same radicals” (in either case untrustworthy); and, 3) participation in national elections as an admission of defeat by rank-and-file militants and sympathizers of the guerrilla movement, and as an attendant recognition that social democracy as represented in AD had indeed won and should therefore be afforded a vote of confidence.

Consider the testimony of Ravin Sánchez, who as a teen in the 1960s participated in the urban guerrilla campaigns in the 23 de enero. He recalled an AD rally in the early 1970s: “When I saw an Accion Democratica rally come down this road, openly identified as adecos, I felt that, well, that we were screwed. When I saw that march come by here

29 Quintero.
with people carry Accion Democratica flags, for me that was, the final proof that we were screwed … we, in that era, were defeated by the adecos.”\textsuperscript{30} Admissions of defeat among demobilized guerrillas translated into at-times very active – and paradoxical – cooperation with the state, as was the case with those from the 23 de enero who went on to fill the ranks of the military, the urban or political police services, or intelligence agencies, in short the same repressive apparatus against which they had squared off as insurgents.\textsuperscript{31}

The common thread during the 1960s’s was the way in which the political struggle between pactist democracy and leftist guerrillas overwhelmingly marked the focus of both the state and insurgents in the 23 de enero, even if statistically the levels of ideological adherence to either front were limited. On the part of insurgents, their emphasis on doctrine rather than popular support exposed their indifference toward social goals. On the part of the state, its inattention to the social demands of the 23 de enero was manifest in the performance of its Worker’s Bank (BO) charged with running the neighborhood. During the dictatorship the BO had pursued a housing policy almost exclusively focused on urban centers and Caracas in particular as the superblocks well illustrated. On coming to power in 1958 under Betancourt, AD reversed this policy, focusing on rural areas and urban construction outside Caracas.\textsuperscript{32} But the BO proved


\textsuperscript{32} For Rómulo Betancourt the 23 de enero superblocks were but a “costly and antihuman” solution to Venezuela’s urban housing shortage, concentrating Caracas’s primacy and therefore leaving the countryside, AD traditional base of support, unattended Rómulo Betancourt, \textit{Mensaje Del Ciudadano Rómulo Betancourt, Presidente De La República, Dirigido a Los Trabajadores En La Noche Del 30 De... }
institutionally ill-equipped to handle the dramatic turnabout without sacrificing efficient management of its superblocks in Caracas.

This was especially true in the 23 de enero where nearly half of the apartments were seized by squatters in the days immediately following the fall of the dictatorship, thus providing an immense challenge at the time of normalizing rent contracts that would result in the ensuing years in staggering financial losses for the BO. At the same time, squatter settlements arose in areas of the 23 de enero that had been designated as parks and footpaths, presenting new challenges and requiring more investment in infrastructure and maintenance at precisely the time when the fledgling democratic regime moved the foci of its development policy outside Caracas. In this context the 23 de enero became a state burden not just politically but also administratively, but the latter lost out. What was sidelined, then, by both militant activists and the state, was attention to residents’ social demands: efficient water, sewage, and waste management services; roads and

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Abril De 1959, Con Motivo De La Celebración Del 1ro De Mayo (Caracas: Presidencia de la República, 1959), 10. In this context, the Banco Obrero moved away from high altitude, high-density structures to promote housing alternatives away from Caracas Sarli, "La Visión Estratégica Del Banco Obrero En El Periodo 1959-1969.". The most celebrated case of planned urbanization in the 1960s was that of Ciudad Guayana, 250 miles southwest of Caracas Lisa Redfield Peattie, The View from the Barrio (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1968).


34 As early as 31 January 1958, just over a week after the 23 January coup, newspapers reported the rise of squatter settlements in the green areas between the superblocks. "Se Construyen Ranchos En Varias Zonas Verdes." A year later, press reports continued to record the ongoing phenomenon. "Ranchos Se Estan Construyendo En Las Faldas De Las Urbanizaciones Obreras," Últimas Noticias, 29 January 1959. Meanwhile state officials responded by constructing additional water and sewage lines, as well as additional schools, literacy programs and cultural centers to meet the demands posed by these new residents. "Ampliaran Canales De Desague En La 23 De Enero.", "Creadas Tres Escuelas Para La 23 De Enero.", "Estudiaran Los Problemas De Los Pobladores De La 23 De Enero.", "Programa De Alfabetizacion Y Extension Cultural Financiara El Banco Obrero," El Nacional, 13 August 1958.
elevator maintenance; more public spaces. Against this backdrop, “pacification” under Caldera created an aperture for “community work” rather than political militancy to take the forefront in organizing in the 23 de enero during the 1970s. Against this backdrop, an alternative current of activism gained force, one emphasizing community needs over political aims and resorting to unarmed, if not always passive, forms of collective action to achieve results.

**Community Activism and Student Protest, 1970s**

Two months after Caldera’s historic inauguration as President in 1969, marking as it did the first time in Venezuelan history power had transferred peacefully from a party in power to its opposition, residents of the La Libertad sector of the 23 de enero shut down streets in protest against water shortages.\(^{35}\) Some among the protesters considered the shortage part of a government reprisal for the “repeated complaints we have made against the various institutions that service our sector, and which have culminated in our refusal to pay some of their fees.”\(^{36}\) Two weeks later, residents in another popular sector of Caracas staged a copycat action in protest over water service shortages in their community. The rash of street actions over public services would prompt stern reactions

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from state officials who, in a pattern repeated throughout the decade, struggled to admit deficiencies while also reproaching neighbors on their tactics.37

Much as Caldera’s election marked a turning point for Venezuelan democracy’s institutional stability, the May 1969 protest also signaled a shift in residents’ approach to organizing and mobilization. In particular, it inaugurated an era of collective action spearheaded by neighbors at large rather than by partisan extremists, with aims that centered on local concerns and community revendications rather than seizing state power. Groups like the Movimiento Social, Cultural, y Artístico (Social, Cultural, and Artistic Movement, MOSCA) in the Sierra Maestra sector, Como Gotas de Lluvia Sobre el Desierto (Like Desert Raindrops) in the Zona E, as well as a wide range of dance groups from across the 23 de enero, organized musical and theatrical events, held art and crafts workshops, and promoted health and drug awareness campaigns. In the Zona Central the Cristo Rey (Christ the King) cultural complex experienced something of a renaissance after a decade of neglect. Its movie house, its theater, its meeting rooms, and its “Liberty Park” and hatch shell all began to draw more and more use.38 In Sierra Maestra, Pastora de Guevara, following divorce and a period of depression, undertook forming a boys’ soccer team, and later a girls’ volleyball team, for youth in her superblock as a way to provide an alternative to drug violence (See Figure 13).39


38 “Por Orden Del Presidente Sigue Al Servicio De La Comunidad El Centro Cristo Rey Del 23 De Enero.”

39 Carmen Paiva and Pastora de Guevara, Interview with author, 10 June 2005.
Community-oriented activism also provided a space for clientelist cooptation. The case of Block no. 31 in the *Zona E* is instructive. Years of “silence” in this sector geographically separated from the main body of the 23 de enero gave the building a reputation as a “white elephant.” According to some the moniker derived precisely from its self-sought isolation from the more direct forms of confrontation with the state that characterized other sectors. For others it referenced a perception that residents stood staunchly behind the long dominant AD political party, represented in elections with the color white. The man who “organized” the block, as residents recall, was a member of the same Metropolitan Police widely derided in most other sectors as the repressive arm of the state in the 23 de enero. He was also a ranking AD militant, skillfully exercising that clout to forge patronage ties with residents and over the years cement authoritarian control of the local *comité social* – the organic predecessor to what became formally-constituted condominium associations in the mid-1980s.41

The tension between cooptation and protest spawned debates that were at times ideologically driven and violently manifested, well reflected in the occasional organizer who arrived home to see their door blackened and burned and speedily scoured the classifieds for home sales far from the 23 de enero. Francisco Suarez, from his apartment on the fifteenth floor of a Monte Piedad superblock, could see threats against his life painted on the walls of the building facing his. His participation with the AD controlled *junta de vecinos* prompted this attack. Eventually, the president of that *Junta* was forced

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40 Hipólito Rondón and Sánchez Nada, Interview with author, 26 February 2005.

41 Josefina Hernandez de Machado et al., Interview with author, 12 March 2005.
to move to Guarenas, 30 minutes east of Caracas, after a pipe bomb was detonated on her doorstep.\(^{42}\) Still, internal debates more often reflected quotidian concerns about conditions of life in a nation of growing contradictions, and about how these contradictions played out in a state-owned and administered neighborhood, indeed Venezuela’s largest urban housing project. For nearly two decades *comités sociales* in each building provided a space for this kind of rich discussion demanding concrete deeds. Generations of activists first found their organizing zeal here; Juan Contreras, today a founding member of the socialist inspired Coordinadora Simón Bolívar in the *La Cañada* sector of the 23 de enero, recalls cutting his political teeth as the youngest president of his building’s comité social, at first sparring with and later securing the respect of older AD and COPEI militants for his work in organizing youth events, cleaning brigades, and other events.\(^{43}\)

But while on one hand pacification – and recognizing defeat in the 1960s armed struggle – prompted activists in the 23 de enero to develop a social vocation over and above partisan political commitment, on the other hand pacification brought renewed confrontation with the state, aimed primarily at youth. Long haired youth, at the time pejoratively referred to as *melenudos*, reported having their heads shaved on their way to and from school.\(^{44}\) Andrés Vasquez, then a teenager, recalled other forms of harassment, as well as the consequences of resistance:

\[^{42}\text{Rondón and Nada. Francisco Suarez, Interview with Author, 20 July 2005.}\]
\[^{43}\text{Juan Contreras, Interview with author, 23 February 2005.}\]
\[^{44}\text{“Melenudos Acusan a Policias De Perseguirles Injustamente,” Ultimas Noticias, 17 March 1969.}\]
They used to make you sweep that whole thing – that was good – you ventured outside and then you had to sweep half the block before going to work or going to school. To talk back (*ponerse rebelde*), there were many rebellious youth who resisted, well they beat them, they shot at them, in fact there was, Cheo is still around, Cheo had his leg blown off, he’s still around. And that’s how they killed many people, they killed so many people here. ⁴⁵

Periodical sources support Mr. Vásquez’s testimony. Between 1972 and 1979, local high school and middle school students in the *23 de enero* staged on average five major protests a year resulting in clashes with police and garnering national press coverage. Reasons varied widely, from reinstating dismissed teachers, to improving school resources, to opposing the military draft. ⁴⁶ For some, protesting reflected mere curiosity, an opportunity to engage in youthful adventuring and rebelliousness. At times, even the threat of protest yielded positive results. In June 1974 authorities at the Banco Obrero ceded a local youth center, used to promote cultural and drug prevention activities, to police. In response students at the nearby Manuel Palacios Fajardo mounted a public challenge, contacting media and promising to take to the streets should the measure go ahead. ⁴⁷ Two weeks later, in an appearance in the *23 de enero*, the Caracas mayor personally overturned the measure, while also promising new resources to revitalize the center. ⁴⁸

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⁴⁶ *El Bravo Pueblo*, López Maya, Margarita, Caracas.


⁴⁸ “Por Orden Del Presidente Sigue Al Servicio De La Comunidad El Centro Cristo Rey Del 23 De Enero.”
Over time, however, the tenor of student protests grew increasingly contentious, even lethal, while aims and outcomes grew less clear and effective. Earlier in the decade staging barricades, hurling rocks, and firing Molotov cocktails against police had marked the range of collective action repertoires by students. Yet by decade’s end the violence routinely extended to setting ablaze local stores and public transportation vehicles and exchanging gunfire with police and national guardsmen, leaving in its wake scores of injured police and several dead students. Indeed between 1977 and 1979, seven youth died of gunshot wounds received while protesting in the 23 de enero. The result was a cyclical pattern of mobilization and repression, where ill-defined protests led to violent clashes resulting in student deaths, in turn generating more protests and violence. A team conducting research in the 23 de enero in the 1980s concluded: “The youth’s effervescence was so brutally repressed [in the 70s], by different means, that to be young actually constituted a crime.”

While students were at the forefront of protest events in the 1970s, mobilization during the decade extended to sectors whose immediate needs had grown sharper during the previous decade’s era of democratic consolidation. Indeed, pacification opened new spaces of collective action at a time when urbanization in Caracas reached new levels of haste. Between 1961 and 1973, as planning policy shifted away from Caracas, the capital’s population jumped over 60 percent, from 1.6 to 2.6 million, bringing new housing, sanitation, and transportation demands to an increasingly saturated city whose

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poverty rates now hovered around 50 percent.\textsuperscript{50} In the 23 de enero, protests over access to housing and sewage by those who had squatted during the 1960s, and over improvements to basic infrastructure by superblock residents, marked the tenor of mobilization throughout the 1970s.

But much as the 1969 protest had heralded, water would prove a major mobilizing factor. Aging pipes and equipment at the city water service, coupled with recurrent droughts and rapidly increasing demand, contrived to create cyclical water shortages in Caracas generally but popular sectors in particular.\textsuperscript{51} Not unlike student protests, over the course of the decade protests grew increasingly contentious. In September 1976, lightning damaged Caracas’s main water supply station. After three weeks without water, neighbors in the same \textit{La Libertad} sector that had set the stage for the 1969 protest took to the streets, shutting down main access roads. When police arrived, gunfire erupted, leading to one dead and one wounded.\textsuperscript{52} A year later, similar protests over water shortages resulted in the deaths of two minors.\textsuperscript{53} And in October 1978, two more died when another demonstration demanding water service turned violent, including a ten year old shot while he played at home by a stray bullet from the events below.\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{50}Briceño, "Caracas Alcanzó Ayer..."


\textsuperscript{52}Freddy Urbina, "Un Joven Muerto De Balazo, Otro Herido, Y Numerosos Intoxicados Durante Disturbios En El 23 De Enero," \textit{Ultimas Noticias}, 1 October 1976


on the violence Interior Minister Manuel Mantilla labeled “maniacs of disorder” those “who try to find problems where none exist.” 55 Meanwhile, then-President Carlos Andrés Pérez went further, noting that “events like those of the 23 de enero make existing public service deficiencies more acute.” 56

Pérez’s comment laid bare a paradox of collective action in the 23 de enero during the 1970s: though characterized by an explosion of mobilization, it was a time nevertheless marked by little in the way of organization. Yet by decade’s end signs of an emerging unity between militants skilled at tactical organization and residents simmering with mounting frustrations had begun to surface. Police reports of the October 1978 violence, for instance, noted that “encapuchados (hooded protesters) with high caliber rifles” took part in the events, reflecting a modality of violence seldom seen since the days of urban guerrilla war. 57 In this context, political activism did not disappear entirely, though its reach had grown much more limited, and its constituency had passed to new generations of activists who had cut their teeth in local struggles over community demands. Continuing state violence throughout the 1970s provided a space for groups of 1960s militants to continue their work with a rising generation of activists, leading informal political education groups with a rising generation of activists in the 23 de enero. Other 1960s militants continued to be politically active in the neighborhood but


56 Coromoto Alvarez, “‘Sucios Como Los Del 23 De Enero Hacen Mas Graves Las Deficiencias Existentes En Los Servicios Publicos’,” Ultimas Noticias, 7 October 1978.

57 Jose Manuel Perez, “Bochiches En El 23 De Enero Por Falta De Agua Con Participacion De Encapuchados Con Armas Largas,” Ultimas Noticias, 6 October 1978.
through “subliminal” rather than clandestine means, shifting their energies to what one veteran of the urban guerrilla referred to as “cultural work” like organizing street theater troupes, musical ensembles, and athletic events.\textsuperscript{58} In this context, where in general terms a pendulum between political and social activism swung during the 1960s and 1970s respectively, the 1980s would witness a synthesis of the two overarching trends.

**Reinventing Democracy: Luis Herrera Campins, the 23 de enero, and the Elections of 1978**

In December 1978 Venezuelans swept Luis Herrera Campins into office, capping a stunning electoral feat for the Christian Democrat COPEI party. Indeed after years of rapid economic growth, massive oil derived revenues, and rising per capita income rates under the administration of AD Carlos Andrés Pérez, Venezuelans opted for an opposition candidate campaigning on a reformist platform, and a dramatic one at that.\textsuperscript{59} Since early in the decade Herrera Campins had sounded increasingly forceful calls to “reinvent democracy” in Venezuela, which since its founding in 1958 had relied on power sharing pacts among political, business, labor and clerical elites to ensure stability and alternability. Still more remarkable was that Herrera Campins’s victory came with the majority support of urban popular sectors in Caracas, who had long shunned COPEI as a party identified with “rural and small town middle classes.”\textsuperscript{60} In fact, voters in Caracas had only recently come to accept the primacy of a two party system in

\textsuperscript{58} Gustavo Rodriguez, Interview with author, 23 August 2005.

\textsuperscript{59} Crisp, *Democratic Institutional Design*, 32.

\textsuperscript{60} Crisp, Levine, and Molina, "The Rise and Decline of Copei in Venezuela," 284.
Venezuela, again and again favoring smaller parties over not just COPEI, but even the nominally center-left AD associated with trade unionism and working classes more broadly.

As one of the more populous working class neighborhoods in Caracas, the 23 de enero well reflected this peculiar pattern. Most residents had continued to support the new democracy by flocking to the polls every five years, returning some of the lowest abstention rates in Caracas. But their participation belied a pattern of rejection of AD and COPEI, the two parties that emerged as the main political brokers of the era. In the first decade of democratic rule between 1958 and 1968, even as AD and COPEI traded the presidency, the two parties combined never received more than 29 percent of the vote in the 23 de enero (see Table 1). Instead residents had backed a far ranging spectrum of third party candidates. In 1958 they voted overwhelmingly for Wolfgang Larrazábal, the young officer who commanded the 23 January coup, and his supporters in the Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV). Though he came a distant second in 1958, trailing AD by fifteen points, Larrazábal again secured most votes among resident of the 23 de enero in 1963, this time coming fourth nationally. In 1968, the 23 de enero again bucked the national trend and instead supported candidates of the CCN, a party created by Pérez Jiménez as he sought a return to political life (see Table 1). Meanwhile COPEI, which narrowly won the presidency, came fourth in the 23 de enero. By 1973, AD and COPEI had broken through, securing 62 percent of the vote. COPEI in particular more than doubled its support in the neighborhood, from 12 percent in 1968 to 28 percent in 1973. Yet it still trailed AD, the eventual winner, by six points (see Table 2). It would be up to
Herrera Campins to close the gap, which he did in 1978 when COPEI received 31 percent of the vote to AD’s stagnant 34 percent.61

Against this backdrop, that Herrera Campins’s message of sweeping change resonated among urban popular sectors like the 23 de enero owed to three key developments shaping Venezuela’s political landscape in the late 1970s, and to his campaign’s ability to recognize them and respond effectively: the consolidation of a new electorate, the growing gulf between oil fueled growth and deteriorating everyday matters like public services, and popular craving for greater participation in the political process.

Throughout the 1970s, migration to urban areas in the northern industrial corridor stretching from Caracas to the western, oil rich state of Zulia continued upward trends it had begun in the 1950s.62 In Caracas alone, internal migration helped push the population from 1.3 million in 1960 to 2.6 million by 1973, a 50 percent increase.63 A more startling figure lay in the unevenness that characterized this growth. In 1959 just 17 percent of Caracas residents lived below the poverty line; by contrast in 1978, that figure had

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61 All electoral data compiled from C.S.E., Las Cuatro Primeras Fuerzas Políticas En Venezuela a Nivel Municipal, 1958-1978, C.S.E., Los Partidos Políticos Y Sus Estadísticas Electorales, 1946-1984 ed. Ezequiel Zamora, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Caracas: Consejo Supremo Electoral, 1987). Between 1958 and 1988, Venezuelans cast two ballots every five years, one for president and one for Congressional delegation, which was selected by voting for a party. According to political scientists John Martz and Peter Harkins, congressional vote returns in Venezuela represented “a truer indication of political tendency than [did] the vote for president, which [was] considerably more subject to the influence of personality.” As such, unless otherwise noted, data are from congressional vote results, not presidential vote results. Martz and Harkins, “Urban Electoral Behavior in Latin America: The Case of Metropolitan Caracas, 1958-1968,” 541.

62 According to census data compiled by CEPAL, in 1970 Venezuela’s urban population was 71 percent of the national total, increasing to 76 percent by 1975, and to 79 percent by 1980. Unless otherwise noted, population data is from the Comisión Economica para Latino América online statistical database, CEPALSTAT, available at: http://www.eclac.org/estadisticas/bases/

63 Briceño, "Caracas Alcanzó Ayer..."
ballooned to 48.5 percent. The result was a far more urban and working-class electorate than ever before, concentrated especially in Caracas which by 1970 accounted for one-fifth of Venezuela’s total population. As one analyst reflecting on the 1978 elections noted, “a successful campaign for the presidency must respond to the demands of city people.”

Generational shifts had also reshaped the electorate. After 1958 Venezuela experienced something of a baby boom. Between 1960 and 1965 the number of Venezuelans under 19 rose from 55 to 57 percent of the population, boosted by a three-point increase in the rate of growth of the population under 4 years old (see Graph 9). These children would come of age in the mid and late 1970s, as reflected in census data. Indeed between 1970 and 1980, the number of Venezuelans under 19 dropped steadily, matched by a similar rise in the number of Venezuelans between the ages of 20 and 39 (see Graph 10). Between 1970 and 1975 alone, the population of Venezuelans aged 20 to 39 grew 10 points faster than it had five years earlier. Politically these figures would translate into an electorate whose formative years had come under the democratic regime installed in 1958. In polling conducted ahead of elections in 1973, for instance, nearly 22 percent of respondents indicated they were first-time voters, up four points from 1968, and eleven points from 1963. And among first-time voters, interest in politics ran high:

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66 This was a nationwide, face to face poll of 1521 adults. Asked “when did you first have to vote for president,” 26 percent answered 1947, 23 answered 1958, 11 answered 1963, and 18 answered 1968. Until 1989, voting in Venezuela was compulsory for everyone over 18. 1947 marked the first direct elections, but
in polling conducted ahead of 1978 elections, 85 percent of respondents born between 1956 and 1960 reported having either “passing” or “very active” participation in politics, compared to 15 percent who reported being “not very active” in politics. Young voters also tended to support center left candidates and parties more than the general population. Ahead of 1978 elections, for instance, youth voter intentions for the center left MAS, MEP, and MIR parties ran 17 percent, compared to 11 percent among the population as a whole.

Changes in the electorate required Herrera Campins to target urban, youth, and working class sectors erstwhile unidentified with Christian Democracy, sectors like the 23 de enero where COPEI had long fared poorly. To do so he deployed a three pronged strategy. To court urban working classes, he moved away from the “songs and jingles”

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67 This was a nationwide, face to face poll of 1130 young adults between 18 and 22 years old conducted in early 1978. In the “index of political participation,” 73 percent reported “passive” participation, 12 percent reported “very active” participation. “Gallup Poll # 1978-Gm033a: Political Attitudes among the Youth,” (Caracas: Gallup, C.A., 1978).

68 Ibid. Among youth responding to the question “if elections were held today, for whom would you vote,” 10 percent said JV Rangel of Movimiento al Socialismo (Movement Towards Socialism, MAS), 2 percent backed LB Prieto Figueroa of Movimiento Electoral del Pueblo (Electoral Movement of the People), and 5 percent backed Americo Martin, a former Marxist guerrilla of the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionario (Revolutionary Leftist Movement). “Electorate Perceptions on the 1978 Presidential Campaign,” (Caracas: Datos, C.A., 1977). This was a nationwide, face to face poll of 2260 adults conducted in September 1977. For the same voter intention question, Rangel returned 8 percent, Prieto Figueroa 2 percent, and Martin 1 percent.

69 In 1968, even as COPEI won the presidency for the first time in elections widely seen as marking the consolidation of Venezuelan democracy, it came third in the Caracas congressional vote behind parties nominally to its left (AD) and right (CCN). In elections in 1958, 1963, and 1968, COPEI placed no better than third in the 23 de enero, returning a high of 12 percent in 1968. In 1973, as the political system coalesced around AD and COPEI, COPEI more than doubled its 1968 total to reach 28 percent in the 23 de enero. C.N.E., Las Cuatro Primeras Fuerzas Políticas En Venezuela a Nivel Municipal, 1958-1978, 19.
that had marked previous electoral efforts and, following the advice of campaign consultants, moved instead to “speak out honestly and not try to paint a pretty picture” about everyday hardships like cost of living increases under Carlos Andrés Pérez. In practice this meant sidelining mass rallies in favor of reaching out directly and personally to urban barrio populations. In the 23 de enero, for example, Herrera Campins made repeated visits to the neighborhood, dining with residents at their homes while in the process hoping to foment an image of an accessible candidate in touch with urban masses.

Consider the case of Lino Alvarez and Silveria Ríos, of block no. 37 in the Zona F. Alvarez had lived in the 23 de enero since its namesake, when like thousands of others he had flocked to the newly vacant superblocks to secure an apartment. He had never much cared for politics, even if politics seemed to care much about him. Born in 1919, he came of age at the height of the dictatorship of Juan Vicente Gómez, whom he met and came to admire for paying off Venezuela’s foreign debt. A year after Gómez’s death in 1935, Alvarez arrived in Caracas, eventually driving a taxi in the burgeoning city. His union belonged to AD, yet Alvarez stressed, “I had my own way of thinking” even as peers insisted AD spoke for him, the working class. Under Pérez Jiménez’s dictatorship, Alvarez kept to his own even when intelligence agents disguised as fares recorded his conversations for hints of dissent. Alvarez’s mother was a lifelong adeca;

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his wife, a committed *copeyana*. On her account he joined the party of Rafael Caldera, stressing nevertheless “I was never a card carrying militant.”

In April 1978, Alvarez and his wife hosted COPEI’s presidential candidate for breakfast. Of Luis Herrera Campins, Alvarez remembered a large, jovial person with an appetite to match his size. After eating the candidate napped in his children’s bed. They did not much talk politics, although Herrera Campins did briefly inquire about problems afflicting his family and measures he might take, as president, to help resolve them. Afterward, Herrera Campins visited with other residents of Block 37, people like Silveria Rios. Like Alvarez, Rios had been among those to find an apartment in the superblocks after the overthrow of Pérez Jiménez. Also like Alvarez, politics had surrounded Rios even if personally she took it all in stride, admitting “I talked to anyone who wanted my vote, but I never went to rallies.” Her father had been a lifelong *copeyano*, so much so that “you couldn’t even mention AD in his presence.” And while she was not one to rally, Rios did join the *damas de COPEI* in her building. So when Herrera Campins went to her building, he paid her a visit. “There were so many of them … reporters and such” she recalled, “all cramped in my small apartment.” A quiet woman, Rios recalls asking the candidate if he would help her two daughters if elected. “And he did,” sending Rios a telegram upon taking office giving “work to one, and a scholarship to the other.”

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71 Lino Alvarez, Interview with author, 30 May 2005.

72 Ibid.

73 Silveria Rios, Interview with author, 27 October 2005.
This form of direct outreach to sectors like the 23 de enero was especially important as it signaled a key departure from the prevailing presidential image, nurtured especially by Pérez, of grand and enlightened leadership. Herrera Campins would also court urban sectors by relying heavily on television; in fact in the late 1970s Caracas alone harbored 25 percent of the nationwide viewing public.⁷⁴ And to reach out to younger, left leaning voters, he would seek out alliances with left wing sectors, condemning AD’s “anti-communist attitude” and eventually earning the support of Communist party leaders.⁷⁵ By 1977, polls revealed that of the three leading candidates, 40 percent of Venezuelans viewed Herrera Campins as the most “progressive” compared to 31 for Luis Piñerua Ordaz of AD and 29 for Jose Vicente Rangel of Movement Towards Socialism (MAS).⁷⁶

But Herrera Campins would make most inroads by focusing his campaign on the place where urban and working class concerns converged: the deteriorating state of public services.⁷⁷ Indeed a glaring disjuncture had marked Pérez’s presidency: where oil-

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⁷⁶ “Electorate Perceptions on the 1978 Presidential Campaign.”

⁷⁷ Michelen and Sonntag’s study of the 1978 electoral process describes how corruption and public services were the two main issues candidates used. Jose Agustin Silva Michelen and Heinz Sonntag, El Proceso Electoral De 1978: Su Perspectiva Historica Estructural (Caracas: Editorial Ateneo, 1979), 131-33.
industry derived revenues had fueled tremendous economic growth, even spurring major investments in water and electric services, the administration of public services had steadily deteriorated during his government, much as it had during every previous government. Even AD’s candidate had to contend with this reality, stressing throughout the campaign that he “would be the candidate of public services and housing” after recognizing that Pérez’s government had sacrificed “certain needs of the people” in order to focus on macronomic growth.

Few areas had experienced this problem more sharply and for longer than the 23 de enero. Just days after the overthrow of Pérez Jiménez on 23 January 1958, residents of the newly named 23 de enero neighborhood warned that a “lack of water and trash collection” in their community threatened the health of children and adults alike. By the mid 1960s, even as the leftist insurgency raged in the neighborhood, political figures of the hard right had joined residents in decrying the physical and symbolic effects of irregular trash collection in democracy’s namesake community, especially as AD governments scaled back the operations of the entity charged with administering the 23 de enero, the Banco Obrero (Worker’s Bank). Meanwhile, the proliferation of squatter settlements throughout the neighborhood as rural migrants flocked to Caracas further

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80 “Faltan Agua Y Aseo Urbano En Bloques 23 De Enero.”

contrived to spoil efforts at normalizing trash collection in the area.\textsuperscript{82} By the 1970s, waste management in the 23 \textit{de enero} had reached crisis proportions. Longer and longer interruptions in trash collection helped create ever larger, and more hazardous, “mountains of trash” in areas previously reserved for children’s play (see figure 1).\textsuperscript{83} Meanwhile contacting media had proven increasingly ineffective, emboldening more and more residents to take to the streets to seek any manner of resolution to their problem with trash.\textsuperscript{84}

During Carlos Andrés Pérez’s presidency, the Caracas government attempted to rein in the garbage crisis in the 23 \textit{de enero} as well as in other popular sectors by implementing trash buy-back programs, encouraging residents of areas where access by compactors proved difficult to take their refuse directly to central processing stations. In the 23 \textit{de enero}, seven \textit{barrios} formed part of the pilot program, servicing over 23 thousand residents in over four thousand households.\textsuperscript{85} The following year, the city government began regular trash collection service to two areas previously covered by the buy-back program.\textsuperscript{86} But as the city’s population grew, so did waste. By late 1976,

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{82}Diogenes Santander, “Falta De Aseo Urbano, Escuelas, Dispensarios Y Parques Infantiles Son Problemas Del 23 \textit{De Enero},” \textit{Ultras Noticias}, 21 January 1966.
\item \textsuperscript{83}Jesus Petit Medina, "Montañas De Basura Acumuladas En Urbanizacion 23 De Enero," \textit{Ultimas Noticias}, 9 January 1970.
\item \textsuperscript{84} “Ni Agua Ni Aseo Urbano En Barrio Sucre Del 23 \textit{De Enero},” \textit{Tribuna Popular}, 16 July 1970.
\item \textsuperscript{85} In the 23 \textit{de enero}, the program served the Mirador, Alfredo Rojas, La Cruz, San Sousi, Unido, and Colinas barrios. \textit{Memoria Y Cuenta Del Año 1974 Presentada Por El Gobernador Del Distrito Federal Diego Arria Al Ilustre Concejo Municipal}, (Caracas: Imprenta Municipal, 1974).
\item \textsuperscript{86} The two barrios were Observatorio and Atlántico. \textit{Memoria Y Cuenta Del Año 1975 Presentada Por El Gobernador Del Distrito Federal Diego Arria Al Ilustre Concejo Municipal}, (Caracas: Imprenta Municipal, 1976).
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aiming to “optimize” waste management in Caracas, Pérez created the Instituto Municipal de Aseo Urbano (Municipal Urban Waste Institute, IMAU) to centralize trash collection and disposal. Yet the IMAU was soon overwhelmed by a 47 percent rise in trash collection, resulting in part from a system of “transfer stations” implemented to streamline delivery of garbage from Caracas to outlying landfills. In fact owing to the 23 de enero’s strategic location at the center of Caracas as well as its wide roads, IMAU located its pilot way station at a busy intersection in the neighborhood.87 Though designed as a community improvement measure, the transfer system and its location soon proved a curse, as disruptions in transferring trash to the landfills meant a dangerous backlogging of waste in the transfer station.

In this context, and in a move sure to resonate in the 23 de enero, Herrera Campins would turn public services into a key campaign issue. As early as 1977, COPEI had made of the “efficient functioning of public services” one of six major policy aims of a future administration.88 A year later, in a 400 page publication detailing plans for an eventual Herrera Campins administration, titled Mi Compromiso con Venezuela (My Commitment with Venezuela), public services had jumped to second among his priorities,89 behind education which polls indicated ranked third among voters’ list of


concerns. What accounted for the shift was a sense by Herrera Campins that public services, though ranked 10th among 18 issues of concern to voters, often represented the state’s most direct and everyday contact with citizens at large. As he noted in *Mi Compromiso*, “It is through public services and state enterprises that the people measure the efficacy and efficiency of government… public services operate as an immediate gauge for the people to see the state’s capacity to make the resources that the state invests socially reproducible and humanely useful.” In this light, Herrera Campins’s plans to improve public services rested on a program to reverse the trend of centralizing services under Pérez and move instead to “stimulate and facilitate … the creation of public, mixed, and private enterprises for urban and residential waste management, and to promote the active participation of users, through their organizations.”

Decentralization, privatization, and direct citizen participation especially were more than timely campaign issues for Herrera Campins. Instead they reflected the core of an ideology of *herrerismo* years in the making, and which contrasted sharply with the hyper-presidentialism that had marked Pérez’s government. In particular, *herrerismo* held the promise of a broad based reform program resting on the premise that Venezuela had successfully transitioned into a period of political stability under representative government.

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90 Asked in early 1977 what issues should be of “immediate” priority for a new administration, respondents answered: (1) reduce the cost of living, (2) fight crime, (3) build more schools, (4) create jobs, (5) support agriculture, (6) improve living conditions for the poor, (7) build more public housing, (8) eliminate corruption, (9) improve medical care, (10) improve public services, (11) help the elderly, (12) improve collective work ethic, (13) improve public administration, (14) improve roads, (15) distribute wealth better, (16) control private industry, (17) promote arts and science, (18) promote decentralization. This was a nationwide, face to face poll of 2260 adults. "Electorate Perceptions on the 1978 Presidential Campaign."

91 Campins, *Mi Compromiso Con Venezuela*, 197.

92 Ibid., 207.
government. As such, the democratic system should begin to set aside the inter-elite pacts once required to make the transition possible and move towards a “participative democracy where people and communities are present, in solidarity, and creatively, in decision making; [where they] responsibly develop their initiatives, provide their opinions and receive a fair share of the benefits of their effort.”

Here in particular residents of the 23 de enero would find a more lasting connection with Herrera Campins than even the promise of better public services. Indeed their periodic protests over public service deficiencies during the previous decade had only scratched the surface of deep grievances about the evolution of Venezuelan politics since 1958. That they had again and again shunned AD and COPEI at the polls, even supporting Pérez Jiménez’s failed electoral bid in 1968, reflected significant ambivalence about what many considered the false promises of the “revolution of ’58.” But their disenchantment with the political system ran only so far. Most had also rejected guerrilla violence in the 1960s as counterproductive. By 1973 most had also accepted the primacy of a two party system. Yet their continued appeal to street protests reflected a desire for greater accountability, and for greater voice, than the quintennial elections provided by pacted democracy.

In these three areas – rejection of violence, respect for electoral democracy, and calls for more direct forms of participation and accountability – residents of the 23 de

93 Diaz, "Bases Del Programa De Gobierno Del Dr. Luis Herrera Campins, Candidato Presidencial Del Partido Social Cristiano Copei", 411.

94 In testimony repeated often among older resident of the 23 de enero, Emilia de Pérez of block no. 27 recalls that during the most intense periods of urban guerrilla conflict in the 1960s, she could hear neighbors screaming “Pérez Jiménez forgive us for we knew not what we were doing!” at the National Guardsmen posted below from their apartment balconies. Pérez.
enero well reflected nationwide trends. In a poll conducted ahead of the 1973 elections, 64 percent of Venezuelans had reported that the vote was the only way to influence government; an even higher number, 93 percent, reported that the vote was “a very important factor in politics,” and 88 percent responded that elections were necessary in order to have democracy. But when asked if they felt they had influence over politics, 66 percent, about the same number who said voting was the only way to influence government, reported feeling they in fact had little influence, suggesting that most saw the vote as a rather weak form of participation. In fact, asked if they would still vote if it were not compulsory, 47.7 said they would do so, while 48.9 reported they would abstain. In 1978, among youth voters, that number was higher – 51.3 percent – compared to 46.1 who said they would still vote if it were not compulsory.

And yet nationally, support for democracy ran high: asked in 1977 “what do you think about democracy, that is about Venezuela’s political system?,” 77 percent responded being either “very happy” (27) or “more or less happy” (50), compared to 13 percent who thought democracy should be replaced and 10 who did not know. Among youth in 1978, the number who felt “another type of system” should replace the existing one was higher than that of the general population, 26 percent, while 58 thought it was

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95 Baloyra and Martz, "Baloyra/Martz Poll # 1973-Baloyra: 1973 Pre-Election Poll - Basic Political Attitudes of the Venezuelan People." This was a nationwide, face to face poll of 1521 Venezuelans. Question 111 asked: “Do you believe people like you have or do not have the power to influence what the government does?” Question 113 asked: “Finally, do you believe that voting is the only way you can influence what the government does?”

96 “Gallup Poll # 1978-Gm033a: Political Attitudes among the Youth."

97 For those wanting to replace democracy, choices included socialism, military, strong, more responsive, dictatorship, communism, and other systems. 45 percent thought a “socialist” system should follow. The next highest response was “other systems,” at 13 percent. "Electorate Perceptions on the 1978 Presidential Campaign."
either working well (8) or should be “fixed somewhat” (50). All told, what these seemingly contradictory figures suggested was that disenchantment with the pacted system was indeed growing, but support for democracy itself remained strong. What most sought was greater influence through a fine tuning of the existing system.

For years, this was precisely the message Herrera Campins had championed, even against mainstream currents within his own party. Indeed as a lifelong Christian Democrat, Herrera Campins adhered to what political scientists identify as one of the major premises of Latin American Christian Democracy, namely the “belief (derived directly from Catholic social doctrine) in subsidiarity and, as a result, in the need to control state intervention and respect the primacy of civil society.” But Herrera Campins’s own brand of social Christianity, which one historian labels COPEI’s “radical current,” went further. Beginning in 1969, just as COPEI made history by becoming the first opposition party in Venezuela to take the reins of government through elections, Herrera Campins had begun to decry pacted democracy as elitist, tending to prevent a sense of popular ownership in the political process: “It is not enough to vote every five years. New and truly participative forms are what citizens long for … Real participation must replace the current formal representation.”

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98 “Gallup Poll # 1978-Gm033a: Political Attitudes among the Youth.”

99 According to Crisp, Levine, and Molina, “subsidiarity refers to the notion that state institutions, state sponsored initiatives, and state interventions generally should be subordinate to civil society. The basic formations of society, above all family and church but also private economic organizations, are primary.” Crisp, Levine, and Molina, “The Rise and Decline of Copei in Venezuela,” 277-78.

100 Ellner, Rethinking Venezuelan Politics, 77.

the next five years, then-senator Herrera Campins continued to sound off on the limits of representative democracy. In September 1972, as he battled unsuccessfully for the presidential candidacy as part of the so-called “Avanzado” wing of COPEI, Herrera Campins assembled Christian Democratic figures from throughout the Americas for a seminar on participative democracy. His own keynote address sought to burnish his credentials as a mainstream politician nevertheless attuned to popular demands for greater influence, arguing for the need to “reinvent democracy” by moving from a “representative to a participative” form of government.

Ironically, COPEI’s 1973 loss to AD allowed Herrera Campins to coalesce COPEI around him, as it meant, according to historian Donald Herman, that “the party would now be ready to support a candidate of the left.” His message of reform received another boost once Pérez’s administration became marked by greater, not less centralization. In this context, Herrera Campins set out to give final shape to herrerismo. In January 1977 he organized a public seminar aimed at lending specificity to “participative democracy,” the preliminary results of which informed COPEI’s platform at its August convention. Though short on details, it promised to “promote people’s consciousness (toma de conciencia) about matters that affect them,” especially at the

102 Ellner, Rethinking Venezuelan Politics, 77-78.

103 Luis Herrera Campins, "De La Democracia Representativa a La Democracia Participativa" (paper presented at the Seminario de Democracia Participativa, Caracas, 4-15 September 1972).


local level “where [they] encounter democracy’s efficiency of lack thereof every day.”

And reflecting poll data, it also upheld the primacy of democracy while making forceful calls for citizens to seize its promise of accountability: “no other system provides the resources democracy offers to punish corruption … and denounce and correct bad mechanisms and practices of government.” By the time in 1978 when he published *Mi Compromiso*, Herrera Campins formalized participation as “the central axis of my government,” further stressing that the state would use “all its resources to stimulate the personal and social actions” of citizens through what he called “state advocacy.”

All told, a state acting as the advocate of a citizenry encouraged to participate more actively in their local, everyday political life was a powerful formula for sectors like those in the 23 de enero: urban, working class, and long eager for precisely this kind of message from a mainstream candidate with a legitimate chance to win. Come election night, Herrera Campins won handily with 47 percent to AD’s 43 nationally. In Caracas too Herrera Campins won a majority 46 percent of the vote, a first for a COPEI candidate. And in the 23 de enero, though it still trailed AD by 2 points, COPEI increased its support from 28 percent in 1973 to 32 percent, marking a full 20 percent rise since 1968 (see Table 1). Yet Herrera Campins secured a victory in the neighborhood, returning 38.7 percent to Piñerúa Ordáz’s 37.9 percent (see Table 2). For many in the 23 de enero, they had taken a chance on a candidate calling on citizens to seize a greater

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107 Campins, *Mi Compromiso Con Venezuela*, xii.
stake in government by demanding accountability. As *herrerismo* faltered, they would
do just that
Chapter Four

“A Weapon as Powerful as the Vote”: Seizing Accountability in the Hijackings of 1981-1982

Days before Christmas in 1981 Earles Gutierrez, his brother and two friends stood waiting at the busy rotary in the Monte Piedad sector of their 23 de enero neighborhood, located just west of downtown Caracas (see figure 1). When they spotted a city trash truck approaching the four youth staged a roadblock and stopped the unsuspecting driver. Earles then forced his way onto the cabin and drove the truck to the garbage depot behind the fifteen-story, 150-apartment building across the street, one of 56 such structures in this sprawling public housing project, Venezuela’s largest. It was the first time since the partial privatization of municipal waste management five weeks before that any manner of trash service had come this way. Earles then instructed the driver to catch a bus at a nearby stop, take it a mile up the road to the local police station, and notify the duty officers of what had taken place and where.

Direct action was a fact of life in Monte Piedad as in other areas of the 23 de enero. For most of the 1970s groups of residents here had set ablaze tires, refuse, and whatever car or bus passed by as a way to denounce problems from irregular water service to police abuse. In the 1960s leftist guerrillas engaged in pitched battles against state agents, turning the sector into a hotbed of political violence. And on 23 January 1958, the neighborhood’s namesake, residents here took to the streets to support the overthrow of a ten year dictatorship and the start of a new democratic era.
Yet even against this backdrop, what came of this particular mobilization in December 1981 was quite extraordinary. That they did not mask their faces or set the vehicle ablaze was uncommon for activist youth in the 23 de enero, especially those like Earles who fashioned themselves keepers of the old anti-establishment guerrilla tradition, more concerned with toppling the state than with parochial community problems. That they called for police response to their illegal seizure of a city vehicle was decidedly rare. Indeed The Diario de Caracas, first to cover the story, called it “a very special way for [the 23 de enero] to get the attention of the trash collection service.”¹

In the time it took police to respond, Earles and the others had gone door to door alerting neighbors of their deed and calling upon them to join in support. While they sounded a general “invitation” to participate, they especially targeted “workers of the home, those who most feel the problem.”² When police arrived, the crowd of mostly women they found gathered around the truck was the result of this effort. Some of these women were veterans of a different tradition of mobilization, one that had long shunned the likes of Earles and their anti-establishment agitation, even as they understood the role of – and had themselves sporadically engaged in – contentious protest to draw attention to their neighborhood’s aging infrastructure. Instead these women had long supported the promise of accountable government provided by the democratic system begun in 1958, again and again taking to the polls even as their candidates lost one election after another. Then there were those “who never participated and were always accused of being sapos

² “…las trabajadoras de la casa, las que sienten más el problema.” Earles Gutiérrez, Interview with author, 14 July 2005.
(collaborators of the ruling parties)." Hours later, Caracas waste management authorities promised to dispatch a crew of 35 in order to “fully satisfy the neighbors.” In turn, neighbors also made a promise: to return the truck undamaged only after they had seen “the last ounce of trash removed from the area.”

Over the next few days and weeks this group of politically active youth and the women who answered their calls to mobilize, a coalition as unprecedented as it was unlikely, would seize more and more vehicles, in the process throwing the bulk of the state apparatus for a spin. Indeed on the second day President Luis Herrera Campins, whose government had clashed violently with youth in the 23 de enero for nearly a year, “furiously” chastised heads of public institutions and ordered an immediate “clean-up” of the neighborhood. National media, which had earlier dismissed the 23 de enero as a “red zone,” picked up on the story and sympathetically reported on its progress. Later, city council members split on the merits of neighbors’ tactics even as they moved to penalize the municipal waste management service officials. Meanwhile other popular sectors in Caracas, even while lamenting becoming associated with the 23 de enero,

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4 "Secuestraron' a Cuatro Camiones Del I.M.A.U.."


threatened to protest “in the style of the 23 de enero” in a bid to draw attention to longstanding problems besetting their own communities.8

The protest reached its climax on the morning of 19 January 1982, a month after it began. Hundreds of firebrand youth, stay-at-home women, guerrilla veterans, and lifelong mainstream party militants – reflecting the protest’s remarkable breadth – crammed into a local elementary school to meet with high level representatives from various public service institutions. By meeting’s end neighbors had secured signed affidavits from each official committing their agency’s resources to revamping the community. Within days work crews began the monumental task of removing tons of waste, refitting long-stalled elevators, installing phone service, rewiring power lines, and repaving local roads, among others. It was the most extensive overhaul of the area in over a decade. And, as neighbors had vowed all along, once repairs were underway they began to release the vehicles that made it all possible.

The secuestros, or hijackings, of public service vehicles in the 23 de enero offer a glimpse into a crucial but frequently glossed over period in Venezuelan political history. Conventional accounts of the years between 1979 and 1983 – the administration of Christian Democrat Luis Herrera Campins – emphasize the economic missteps of a state facing the first signs of economic stress following years of oil bonanza. Most coincide in pointing to “Black Friday” in February 1983, when a government facing plummeting oil prices moved to devalue the currency, as “the visible beginning of the decline of Punto

Fijo democracy.”⁹ Over time, according to this narrative, the economic forces unleashed on Black Friday gave way to the collapse of a party system once presumed resilient, as the revenues that had once anchored power sharing pacts among political elites began to dry up.¹⁰ As Fernando Coronil writes: “Courting both popular sectors and foreign creditors, [Herrera Campins and his successor Jaime Lusinchi] preserved the political and economic centrality of the state, channeling public resources to favored private interests, demobilizing the population through patronage, publicity, and repression, further concentrating wealth at the top, and placing the burden of the debt on the working population for generations to come.”¹¹

To be sure, errant economic policy did mark Herrera Campins’s presidency, after which two decades of political turmoil would indeed bring the collapse of pacted democracy as Hugo Chávez swept into the presidency in 1998 promising to build a new republic. But events like the secuestros belie the linearity of this narrative. Instead they suggest that the process of recalibrating democracy as it began to fray was far more negotiated from above and below than argued by accounts that rely on economic indicators and analyses of elite level politics to make wider claims about the ways in which urban popular sectors responded to the shifts taking place around them. The result is a bevy of unanswered questions: if political elites were successful in “demobilizing the

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⁹ Jennifer L. McCoy, “From Representative to Participatory Democracy?,” in The Unraveling of Representative Democracy in Venezuela, ed. Jennifer L. McCoy and David Myers (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 266.


¹¹ Coronil, The Magical State, 370.
population,” then what are we to make of the secuestros? And if “patronage, publicity, and repression” marked the state’s effort at demobilizing popular sectors, then why did the highest levels of the state respond by bending to neighbors’ demands? And if conventional periodization points to 1983 as the beginning of the decline of pacted democracy, then where do the secuestros fit within this narrative? Did they in fact reflect popular disenchantment with democracy, or did they instead lay bare the markings of a different vision of democratic citizenship? In short, how did urban popular sectors incorporate the first signs of crisis into their patterns of social life, and with what consequences?

This chapter argues that Herrera Campins’s presidency was a period rife with conflict and negotiation between state and populace as each struggled to forestall the collapse of a political system they presumed resilient. In particular, it claims that Herrera Campins’ presidential bid – which had rested on the promise to “reinvent” Venezuelan democracy twenty years after its founding by fomenting greater popular participation in the political process – provided an opening for popular sectors to experiment with new tactics and discourses of mobilization, focused less around claims to goods and services and more around demands for better governance. In the 23 de enero – a community imbued with strategic significance as the namesake of democracy’s founding, located a stone’s throw away from the Presidential Palace, and among the most politically active of Caracas neighborhoods – residents would draw from a contradictory legacy of support for democracy at the ballot box on one hand, and radical anti-establishment agitation in the streets on the other. In 1981, residents would find ways to bring together these once
conflicting currents while drawing from their electoral support of Herrera Campins to claim a mantle of legitimacy for actions that otherwise stood outside legality. Reflecting on the secuestros, one editorialist approved of the measure while also noting that residents should use “a weapon as powerful as the vote” in the following elections to complement their actions. Of course, it had been their electoral participation that residents drew upon to legitimize their actions. As such, rather than marking a decline of popular mobilization and politicization among urban popular sectors, this chapter argues that in the early 1980s events like the secuestros constituted an affirmation of democratic values as residents combined long standing support for representative democracy with tactics forged in the fray of contentious protest to pursue basic principles of liberal citizenship: accountability, representativity, and respect for institutions.

“Straight for the Abyss”: The Fall of Herrerismo

In late February 1981 Romulo Betancourt, Venezuela’s first elected post-1958 president and founder of AD, took the floor his party’s annual convention and dropped a bombshell. Addressing attendees, Betancourt cited an “ultra-confidential” report allegedly produced by members of Herrera Campins’ cabinet. The report assailed Herrera Campins’s government, describing a picture of growing dependence on oil revenues, rising unemployment, “failed” schools, and stagnant investment, all compounded by a bloated state bureaucracy. In this climate, he warned, basic democratic principles proved insufficient to sustain social stability. “We enjoy civil liberties, freedom of assembly, of verbal and written speech,” noted Betancourt, but “a lack of faith has spread across the
country, a lack of confidence in the democratic regime.”

Elsewhere in the political spectrum others had similar warnings. In early February, for instance, José Vicente Rangel of MAS had told press: “if the national leadership does not reflect on … their continued irresponsible behavior, [then] Venezuelan democracy is headed straight for the abyss.”

More than partisan alarmism underlay their remarks. Since taking office in March 1979, opinions of Herrera Campins’s government had swayed wildly from popularity to contempt. At first he had taken several significant steps to make real the calls for reform that had informed his campaign. Responding to civil society groups he had established a cabinet level position on women’s affairs, demonstrating how the axes of “participation” and “state advocacy” that underlay his vision of democratic society might successfully converge. Through a program of weekly roundtables with citizens at large, Herrera fashioned a direct channel of communication with popular sectors outside the realm of organized civil and political society, in the process demystifying the image of the “almighty state” that had risen up during Carlos Andrés Pérez’s presidency. Similarly he had sought to arrive at a more accurate rendering of the needs of urban popular sectors by having Fundacomun (Foundation for Municipal and Community Development), a once touted, USAID funded urban renewal agency that had long since

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fallen into bureaucratic stupor, conduct the first nationwide census of urban barrios in 1979, followed by a second census in 1980.

In the early going under Herrera Campins, the 23 de enero also witnessed changes for the better. While violent student protests had greeted Herrera Campins just days after his inauguration, these were more signs of youth disaffection with the outgoing government, under whom twelve students had died in clashes with police,\textsuperscript{15} than with the new administration. In fact youth and left sectors in the 23 de enero had quickly warmed to Josefina Delgado, Herrera Campins’s appointee to jefe civil (the neighborhood’s highest civilian authority). According to Manuel Mir from the Observatorio sector of the 23 de enero, and who would later work with Delgado during her tenure, Herrera Campins had personally named Delgado to the position during a visit to the neighborhood following his election. That the President himself appointed the 23 de enero’s jefe civil was a highly unorthodox move. Legally, the designation of jefes civiles in Caracas parishes fell to the Caracas governor, a figure directly appointed by the President. Yet what stood out from Delgado’s designation, in Mir’s account, was its non-partisan nature. Indeed, as a political appointee, the governor of Caracas had customarily also used the positions of jefe civil to cement political patronage. But in the Herrera Campins’s case, he had tapped Delgado for the position on a whim while talking with a local area resident after attending Mass at the Cristo Rey Church in the Zona Central of the 23 de enero. According to Mir, Delgado’s father, a longtime COPEI activist and resident of the neighborhood, approached Herrera Campins and introduced him to his daughter, recently

\textsuperscript{15} El Bravo Pueblo.
graduated from law school. “You will be jefe civil,” the President elect reportedly said.16

In this sense, though capricious, Delgado’s reflected. It also cemented Herrera Campins’s ties to a neighborhood where he had just scored a historic victory after making it a centerpiece of his presidential campaign. Once in office, Delgado moved quickly to establish ties with leftist sectors of the population, in turn reflecting Herrera Campins’s own overtures to parties like the PCV. When a Mirador day school run by a Communist party militant burned down in late 1981 under mysterious circumstances, the director recalls being “surprised” at the sympathy and support Delgado offered her.17 Other then-youth recall how she had interceded on their behalf when police detained them for political activism in the 23 de enero.18 When police detained several youth, including a then-seventeen year old Juan Contreras of La Cañada, for participating in student protests at the Manuel Palacio Fajardo high school in Zona Central, Delgado personally interceded on their behalf and had then released.19 Delgado would remain jefe civil for nearly all of Herrera Campins’s term, a dramatic departure for a post long marked by pomp and rapid turnover, and a move well reflecting Herrera Campins’s efforts to bolster local government.

16 Manuel Mir, Interview with Author, 10 February 2005.

17 “Manos Criminales Incendiario Centro Cultural 'Voz Del Mirador',' Tribuna Popular, 4-10 September 1981.

18 Lisandro Perez, Interview with author, 21 May 2005. Pérez, a lifelong resident of one of the squatter settlement communities in the 23 de enero, had been a militant of underground guerilla organization Bandera Roja during his teens in the early 1980s, becoming a cadre by the mid 1980s. He recalls in at least two occasions between 1980 and 1983, Delgado interceded on his behalf when Metropolitan Police detained him for his political work. In an ironic turn, in 2005 Lisandro Pérez became jefe civil of the 23 de enero after local groups resisted the appointee of Caracas’s pro-Chávez mayor.

19 Contreras.
By 1980, most contentious collective action of the kind that had characterized the 1970s had given way to cooperation between state and civil society sectors in the parish. Women’s groups in the 23 de enero and surrounding communities had found new support for their grievances, while once skeptic neighbors had begun to work alongside police to fight crime. Resources for education and athletics had increased, to the point that Bernardo Piñango, a local youth trained in a local gym, won Olympic silver in 1980. And plans to install a parish council to interface with city officials on matters of public services and order – long a linchpin of Herrera Campins’s thoughts on generating popular political consciousness – had begun in earnest after a presidential decree mandating “community participation in regional development” took effect. In part these measures helped COPEI in mid 1979 to sweep municipal elections the first time they were held separately from presidential and congressional elections, taking 51 percent nationally to AD’s 31; in Caracas COPEI candidates claimed 49 percent to AD’s 28. By early 1980, pundits openly speculated on whether a new era in Venezuelan politics was afoot, marked by the rise of the so-called “Christian left” and its champion, Luis Herrera Campins. Wrote one analyst: “Never has the future been brighter for Venezuela’s Social Christians.”

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21 Rafael Garcia, "Hay Que Tomar En Cuenta Al 23 De Enero Para Los Panamericanos," Ultimas Noticias, 12 February 1981.


But by the time Rangel had warned about an impending abyss in February 1981, little of that early optimism remained. During 1980 a quick succession of crises struck at the core elements of *herrerismo* – fiscal stability, state advocacy, participation, efficiency in public services – effectively ending efforts at state-led reform. In 1979 the administration had tried to stem the tide of spiraling debt and spending that marked Pérez’s presidency. Government expenditures shrank by 22 percent, the current account balance closed at a surplus, and the rate of foreign borrowing declined by half of its 1978 level. But the administration’s most controversial austerity measure, eliminating Pérez-era price controls and subsidies, quickly spiraled out of control. Inflation spiked up 74 percent from the previous year, closing at 12.4 percent in 1979. To mitigate the day to day impact of rising costs Herrera had decreed a wage hike of 30 percent in his 1980 New Year’s address. But the measure proved a stopgap at best, creating a temporary sense of prosperity that quickly vanished as the flood of cash in the economy was not matched by greater production, generating even greater inflation. By the first quarter of 1980, 44 percent of Venezuelans considered the elimination of price controls the Herrera


25 In early 1980 a Gallup poll showed that sixty four percent of Venezuelans considered their family’s living standards to have increased or stayed the same during the previous year, reflecting the offsetting impact of rising costs and rising wages. "Political Opinion in Venezuela," (Caracas: Gallup, C.A., 1980). Question 10 asked about living standards: “People’s living standards are measured by what they can purchase and what they actually do purchase. In general terms, do you believe your family’s living standards have risen (0), dropped (2), or stayed the same (1) in the past year?” 0 (404), 1 (712), 2 (597). Eleven did not know. Venezuelan economist Pedro Palma details six primary reasons for inflation’s continued rise during this period, among them “the compulsive rise of wages and salaries in accordance to the Wage and Salary Increase Law in effect since January 1980, which was not met by a parallel increase in productivity.” This combination of greater spending power and output levels that were slow to rise resulted in higher competition for a similar numbers of goods, pushing prices up. Pedro A. Palma, “La Economia Venezolana En El Periodo 1974-1988,” in *Venezuela Contemporánea, 1974-1989*, ed. Pedro Grases (Caracas: Fundación Eugenio Mendoza, 1989), 194-95.
government’s worst policy decision, while seventy four percent considered it among the government’s three worst moves.26 Finance Minister Ugueto Arismendi had called it a “painful necessity.” Schoolteacher Yazmira Rodriguez laid bare the public’s reply: “When you push a cart through a supermarket here you should hear what the housewives say … there are no kind words for the government.”27 A foreign diplomat summarized the collective lament: “[Herrera Campins is] a good man, he raised high hopes, but he implements things badly and can get no support for them.”28

Even voices within the administration acknowledged the gulf between its once lofty rhetoric of participation and their difficulty in bringing it to fruition. In an early December 1981 “Seminar on the Needs of the Population” sponsored by the World Bank, Alba Illaramendi of Fundacomun took up the matter directly: “We are aware that it is not enough to speak about popular participation to show that we have a democratic system; it is more important to create the mechanisms and facilitate the conditions so that participation is made real.” Still, she reaffirmed the administration’s basic commitment to a more participative model of democratic governance as both viable and necessary in order to encourage popular ownership of the political system, especially among urban popular sectors: “The [Herrera Campins government] is emphatic in stating that

26 “Political Opinion in Venezuela.” Questions 5, 6, and 7 asked about government policy: “Tell us three things the current government did badly or did not do and should have?” Q5: Removing price controls (765); Q6: Removing price controls (353); Q7: Removing price controls (160).


participation is the form by which the people take an active presence and don’t delegate their abilities to think, to act, and to create.”

But where herrerismo most suffered was in the area Herrera Campins had again and again indicated was the everyday “gauge” of democratic performance: public services. Already in 1980 deteriorating living conditions in Caracas had contributed to the President’s plummeting poll numbers, even garnering international attention when in March Herrera Campins’s planning minister, exasperated, remarked to the New York Times: “Things have gotten so bad that it is almost impossible to improve the efficiency of public services.”

Waste management in particular reflected the worst of the state’s failure. Where Carlos Andrés Pérez’s had consolidated waste management services around a newly created IMAU, Herrera Campins’s response, in keeping with his decentralization efforts, had sought instead to transform the IMAU into an administrative entity. Rather than collecting trash it would lease routes to private contractors selected by a bidding process, reflecting Herrera Campins’ call to find “public, mixed or private” enterprise solutions wherever needed.

But in January 1981 the effort exploded in scandal when Ali Buniak, an operations manager, was arrested for soliciting over $20,000 in exchange for lucrative trash route contracts. Soon after Buniak’s arrest, an informant tipped media about

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29 “Estamos Conscientes De Que No Basta Hablar De Participacion Para Evidenciar Que Tenemos Un Sistema Democratico,” El Universal, 6 December 1981.


corruption reaching far deeper into the IMAU, casting Buniak as a “lowly operator” thrown out to divert attention from an extortion ring at the highest levels. Portraying the IMAU as a mafia, the informant claimed “many, many people [were] involved,” chief among them a high level “capo” who had collected “tens of millions of bolívares … for almost a year by authorizing contracts with certain businessmen and by [taking a] cut on everything that the IMAU pays on those contracts.”

In response IMAU’s director, Edmundo Arias, termed the allegations “a vendetta by those who have been hurt by the end of a business plagued by irregularities, and who wished to stop the process that will turn IMAU into a private company.” In mid February Arias testified for seven hours before a grand jury. On leaving he vowed to testify “as many times as needed” to clear IMAU’s name and proceed with its restructuring. “I don’t just want to clear the trash in the streets,” he stressed, “but also all the trash in the IMAU.” He also announced that he would seek the approval of Herrera Campins himself for all winning bids, thereby involving the president directly in the trash issue. By month’s end, what began with the arrest of a “lowly operator” had ensnared not just Arias but six more high level IMAU officials called to give grand jury testimony.

What the press dubbed the IMAU “affaire” presented Herrera Campins with problems on several fronts. Ongoing public service deficiencies in Caracas struck at the

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heart of what had been a bedrock issue in his campaign. Likewise Herrera Campins had staked his campaign on a promise of more efficient government, but the IMAU scandal instead spoke more of the administrative clumsiness that had marked much of his reform efforts in 1980. And while the scandal did not implicate Herrera Campins directly, corruption in the IMAU nevertheless constituted an affront to the President’s widely recognized “reputation for honesty.”

But where the IMAU scandal proved most fateful was in the way Herrera Campins would henceforth become associated with the waste management problem.

By 1981, then, a bruised and battered Herrera Campins administration had fallen into patterns of corruption and mismanagement that plagued his predecessor and which Herrera had vowed to end upon taking office. Worse, despite scattered signs of greater citizen participation in decision making, Herrera Campins had decidedly abandoned the calls to “reinvent democracy” that informed his presidential bid. Yet the vision of a “participative” politics, rising from a “conscious and organized” citizenry to forge a “truly democratic society” remained a powerful call to arms. In this light the fall of herrerismo at the level of the state would serve to provide an opportunity for residents of the 23 de enero to reinvent democracy but from below, and in their own terms.

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35 Onís, "Venezuela’s Woes Hurt Leader's Image."

36 Campins, Mi Compromiso Con Venezuela, 13, 16, 12.
“Clean by Christmas”: Resurgent Radicalism and Public Service Collapse in the 23 de enero

In late November 1981 officials at the IMAU announced that after over a year of bidding, negotiations, and scandal, they had leased trash collection services in Caracas to four independent firms. It was an unprecedented move towards privatization in Venezuela, promising to bring efficiency to an area of everyday life that had come to symbolize the state’s administrative incompetence. But much as confusion had marked most of the process, it would also eclipse this final stage. Indeed just days after the announcement the Caracas city council convened to discuss ongoing trash problems afflicting the city. According to press reports, an otherwise “lukewarm debate” was “revolutionized” when Lino Alvarez, councilman for the MIR (Leftist Revolutionary Movement), read the IMAU’s charter. According to Alvarez, the charter gave the council oversight of the institute even though they had long since “relinquished” that role, assuming IMAU to be autonomous. Embarrassed, the council quickly summoned both IMAU’s director and private company chiefs. In the ensuing days each would add drama to what was already, by one reporter’s account, an “enthralling” circumstance. For instance after his meeting with the council, an exasperated IMAU director all but begged to be rid of his post, saying “they would be doing me a favor” by asking for his

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resignation. Meanwhile seeking to bring some measure of calm and optimism, owners of the newly-hired companies vowed to have Caracas “clean by Christmas.”

Two weeks later, a group of residents from the Monte Piedad sector of the 23 de enero took to the press to report that fifteen days had passed since the last time trash was collected in the area. “Right now most of the chutes are totally full and the trash has rotted, bringing as a result the proliferation of rats and a strong stench” said Ednio Rosales of block no. 13. He added that they had repeatedly called the company newly charged with waste management in the area, to no avail. “It seems,” he said, “like we will spend Christmas surrounded in trash.” Meanwhile elsewhere in the 23 de enero other residents reported water shortages even as a broken pipe, and a botched effort to repair it, spewed tons of water daily.

Twenty five years after the founding of the 23 de enero, these were just the latest examples in a long list of grievances that had been accumulating throughout 1981. In August for instance, residents of Monte Piedad reported that a sewage pipe leak months earlier had unleashed a “river” of waste, and despite repeated pleas to the agency charged


40 Marco Tulio Paez, “Empresas Recolectadoras De Basura Ratifican Al Concejo Municipal Del D.F. Que Caracas Estara Limpia En Navidad,” *El Universal*, 3 December 1981. Ironically, this episode transpired as Caracas hosted a continental summit on urban waste management, during which participants from throughout the Americas coincided in noting that “deficient” services were. “Los Servicios De Aseo Urbano Son Deficientes En Latinoamerica,” *El Universal*, 2 December 1981.

41 Cruz Moreno, “Desde Hace 15 Dias No Recogen La Basura En El 23 De Enero,” *Ultimas Noticias*, 18 December 1981.

with administering the blocks, no repairs had come. At the same time residents in blocks 42-43-44, in the 23 de enero’s western edge, alerted press that besides perennial water shortages, only one of six elevators servicing 450 apartments was in working order, with some having broken down seven years earlier. And in September mud slides in Monte Piedad claimed several of the neighborhood’s main access roads, again with no repairs in sight despite repeated efforts to contact authorities. By early December, just as contractors promised to clean Caracas, a full page spread in the major national daily El Universal reported on living conditions in the 23 de enero, concluding it was in a “terrible state of abandon.”

That residents would respond violently to this crisis, and that authorities would react in kind, seemed a foregone conclusion. Indeed failing services were just part of the problem affecting the 23 de enero throughout 1981. As the city council debated the trash situation in late November, violent clashes between local youth in the 23 de enero and Metropolitan Police had resulted in the “takeover” of 18 blocks in Monte Piedad, Sierra Maestra, and Zona Central by authorities. In part, the clashes were sparked by the death a sixteen year old girl, which neighbors blamed on authorities’ negligence after she


44 Jose Manuel Perez, "El Drama De Un Solo Ascensor Para 5 Mil Personas De 3 Bloques Clama Por Urgente Atencion Oficial," Ultimas Noticias, 18 August 1981.


was wounded during a shootout in *Monte Piedad*.\[^{48}\] As the clashes intensified in early December, one youth died reportedly after falling from the roof of a local high school.\[^{49}\] However days later an autopsy and an investigation revealed he had died from a shotgun blast fired from a police helicopter hovering above.\[^{50}\] By mid December the violence between state and youth in the *23 de enero* showed few signs of ebbing; in fact it had expanded to surrounding areas. A new round of clashes on 9 December resulted in one burned bus, set ablaze by students outside their middle school in the *Zona Central* sector of the *23 de enero*.\[^{51}\] Days later, teachers at the school reported that students had burned nearly a dozen of their vehicles, since they had refused to cancel classes to honor the dead student.\[^{52}\] In the ensuing days youth in the *23 de enero* followed this action by looting several distribution trucks and setting other vehicles blaze.\[^{53}\]

All told, as Christmas neared, the *23 de enero* was a cauldron of pent up grievances, violent agitation, and police presence, a far cry from what had marked the first two years of government under Herrera Campins. In fact as *herrerismo* faded in


early 1981, radicalism in the 23 de enero had seen a steady resurgence. In late January police had opened fire on students demonstrating outside the Manuel Palacios Fajardo high school in the Zona Central, killing fifteen-year old Miguel Rios and seriously wounding a second student.54 Students had responded by blocking major roads throughout the parish, setting ablaze tires and hurling bottles at passing vehicles.55 As democracy celebrated its 23rd anniversary on Friday 23 January, the Metropolitan Police resorted to a tried tactic, dispatching several hundred officers to take up posts in the superblocks.56 And as it had in the past, the measure backfired. Rather than easing tensions, the show of force led to more clashes, leaving one youth shot and a rash of protests that would not abate for nearly two months.57

What was particular about this resurgence of youth activism in 1981 was that throughout the protests, reports had surfaced that holdovers from the years of guerrilla war in the 1960s, sensing an opportunity to make inroads with a new generation of disaffected youth, sought to turn the protest into larger political indictment. According to one account, “a group of zagaletones (vagabonds) arrived in front of the Luis Razzetti school (in the Zona Central), yelling chants against the police and the government ….”58 Later, members of the MRT (Movimiento Revolucionario de Trabajadores), a short lived splinter group with an active youth wing in the 23 de enero, informed press that police

stationed in the blocks had taken to arbitrary beatings and detentions. A few days later, fliers surfaced throughout the 23 de enero railing against AD and COPEI for failing to bring about “the revolution,” while at the same time tapping into popular disenchantment by critiquing public service failings and the high cost of living. In addition they accused police of using the superblocks as “target practice,” matching rocks with gunshots in a measure of excessive force.59

But if the political undertones of this type of radicalism rang familiar, so too did the response from the community at large. Residents representing public transportation and small businesses in the parish mounted a public rebuke of what they referred to as “criminal actions … with no justified bearing in the political stage, and which resort to throwing rocks and targeting the private property of popular sectors who when they move about the parish it isn’t exactly to go to the Country Club.” The problem lay in the ancillary effects of the protests both for the daily life and for the future of a community that media had – in a throwback to the bitterest days of urban conflict at the height of the 1960s – again taken to referring to as a “red zone.” “These ultrosos,” they noted, “prevent local youth from work and study … and constitute a permanent threat for everyone.” And, recognizing that police repression fueled rather than quelled tensions, they turned to parents, urging them to take the necessary precautions in order to prevent their children from participating” in the protests. The accumulated grievances were enough for one reporter covering events in the 23 de enero to editorialize that “ultra left groups …

the poor or are used by them, and who under such circumstances can never ally themselves with these *encapuchados*.”

These remarks well captured the underlying gulf between youth militants and the wider community in the 23 de enero. To be sure, practical concerns regarding the impact of protests and attendant repression on daily life remained a major factor tending to keep the two separate. But what most ensured their continued split was lack of attention to local issues that was the hallmark of radical political mobilization in the neighborhood. In this respect, the seemingly resurgent political activism among youth in 1981 most clearly resembled the 1960s era of guerrilla conflict to which it traced its ideological and tactical roots. As youth militants like Lisandro Pérez of Bandera Roja conceded in hindsight, seizing state power primarily through destabilizing actions and more generally by holding aloft the possibility of a revolutionary alternative to pactist democracy had “marginalized” questions of local outreach. In this context protests marked more than a nuisance; instead, for residents at large, they reflected selfishness and lack of seriousness as seen in a generally dismissive attitude toward youth protests.

Read against the grain, however, the words and deeds of both militants and residents at large laid bare areas where radical political activism and local interests might converge. Indeed, in condemning youth protests neighbors had stressed the kind of “rock throwing and targeting [of] private property” that long characterized students’ contentious repertoire. At root, it was disruption of public life that stoked popular scorn,

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60 Ibid.

61 Perez.
and the destruction of property that residents’ repudiated about militant tactics. These were specific rather than wholesale critiques of contentious mobilization that suggested spaces for acceptance if not outright collaboration. Also, in condemning student protests as having no bearing in politics, residents were asserting their belief in the democratic system, affirming rather than attacking its ability to respond to demands when pressured non-violently. But it was far from a rejection of political protest in general. Taken together, these were primers for a different kind of collective action, contentious within limits, political but not anti-systemic. And militants had shown signs of beginning to understand. While still not localizing their message, their fliers had nevertheless addressed issues of specific social concern – continuing public services deficiencies, rising inflation – thus marking a significant departure from the broad anti-statist message they had long conveyed.

Meanwhile, the Herrera Campins administration sought to reclaim the mantle of reform. On 5 December the Caracas city council announced plans to “remodel” the 23 de enero, including adding phone lines and repairing elevators. And on 17 December, just days before the first hijackings, the Caracas governor alongside the city council installed the first “parish council” in the 23 de enero. Said one councilman: “We want [to end] the manguareo (paper shuffling) of some public servants who don’t do their duty, and offer an image of effective services in this parish, the image of a respectable community that wishes to participate in and become integrated to solving the problems it faces.”


was too little, too late. The resurgence of radicalism in the 23 de enero in December 1981, coupled with mounting grievances among the population at large, and renewed calls for greater popular participation in democracy, set the stage for an unlikely collaboration, and for the beginning of a new era of popular mobilization that would challenge all levels of the state. In retrospect, the opening lines of the article by some of democracy’s elder statesmen seemed prescient: “Among the most celebrated attributes of political leaders was always their ability to detect when an era has ended and determine the signs of the era that is beginning … But woe to the nation whose political elite fails to understand its times.”64

“We Have to Find Another Way”: The Secuestros Begin

By the time on 19 December when Earles Gutierrez, his brother and two friends set out to hijack a trash truck, “public services had disappeared” in the 23 de enero. Only the “well connected” – literally – had home phones; electrical wiring had corroded and been replaced by dangerous “spiderwebs” of cables hanging outside windows; water service remained at best inconsistent, at worst absent; working elevators were rare. And of course, trash lay everywhere, uncollected now for over three weeks. Some ducts were backed up to the fourteenth floor. Recalled one resident: “the worms had started to eat the blocks.”65 In response, the four youth undertook to “do something.” They slowed traffic in the rotary in front of block no. 7, waiting until a trash truck en route to the local

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65 Rodriguez.
way station passed by. When it did, they blocked the road and Earles, holding a metal tube under his shirt, boarded the truck, telling its frightened driver: “Unfortunately, you will pay for the consequences of what we are suffering. You will be fired, and we will have our trash picked up.” When police arrived, they stood their ground: “All we want in exchange for the truck is that you commit to send someone to pick up this trash.” Some argued that they should not give up the truck, but Earles recalls: “In a hijacking, you have to negotiate.” So they gave up the truck, with a promise that clean-up personnel would arrive by Monday 21 January. As wrote the Diario de Caracas when it picked up the story, it was a “very special way” to protest. As the Diario reported, “The police authorities initially treated the news as an act of violence, the kind that frequently occurs in the west [of Caracas]. But,” the article went on to remark, “when they went to the site they were met with a civic revendicative action.”

The decision not to burn the truck but rather to seize it was born of a long running struggle among militant youth in the 23 de enero, who by 1981 were reeling from dual dejection. On one hand, internecine struggles among clandestine political factions in the 23 de enero had resulted in a “fading” of militancy, as many youth who had partaken in student protests throughout the 1970s had fallen into drugs and crime. On the other hand, their reputation among the community at large had suffered throughout 1981: “They called us malandros (rascals) for our political work.” Some of these conflicts were reflected in the trajectory of Earles and his brother. As young as eight years old Earles had formed part of a group of “Revolutionary Pioneers,” which tried to attach itself to

veterans of the guerrilla struggle. Among them was Gustavo Rodriguez, a former guerrilla who in the 1970s had started cultural associations that doubled as clandestine revolutionary groups, and who would go on to mentor Earles and help coordinate the secuestros. By contrast Earles’s brother, several years older, was part of a generation that shunned guerrilla veterans for having given up the armed struggle. The result was a conflicting approach about how best to move forward a message of revolutionary change.

Consider the following example. In 1978, violent clashes over water shortages in the 23 de enero had resulted in a massive demonstration organized by an unusual collaboration among local factions. The magnitude of the support surprised all of them. Yet an argument between Earles and his brother ensued when the latter argued that a woman present at the demonstration, an AD militant and therefore someone whom he derisively called a “sapo” (toad), should be excluded. Earles recalls saying: “It’s not that they’re sapos, it’s that we create terror when we climb onto the rooftops [and throw stones at the police], and when they’re terrified people need to find an escape, and that escape may be to reject us, it will never be to support us because they don’t identify with that. So it’s not that they’re sapos, it’s that we haven’t had the methods to incorporate people into the process. And that woman is fighting because she feels affected by the

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67 Rodriguez. In the early 1970s, Gustavo Rodriguez dropped out of college to work alongside a friend who had recently returned from studying theater in the United States, and who had been influenced by the Black Power movement. By that time, in block no. 3 where he had lived since the days of Pérez Jiménez, “there was a group of youth who were very restless, very animated, who were in need of an organization, needing to have someone shape them.” So they took over a local church in Monte Piedad and established a “Casa de la Cultura del Pueblo” (House of the People’s Culture), where they held workshops about “politics, sex, abortion,” and where they showed Cuban, Mexican, and Chilean revolutionary cinema. When his friend and his family was “kicked out [of the 23 de enero] at gunpoint,” the work turned clandestine and covert. For instance they organized puppet shows with explicitly revolutionary content, performing throughout the 23 de enero.
problem of water and repression. And she’s also affected by the terrorism that ensues when we climb on the rooftops.” For this stance, Earles earned a reputation as a “liberal” among his brother’s circle. Yet he continued to argue that the way to generate support was by finding common ground: “The only people who mobilized in the 23 de enero were women, and the only men were militant youth. All the others were busy playing the ponies.”

Still, when the matter of hijackings came up in December 1981, according to Earles some among this group feared it as “extremely radical, terrible, we’re going to end up in jail.” Some proposed instead that they take the piled up trash and burn it on the streets, but as Earles recalls saying: “we’ve tried that crap forever and it’s always the same, we’re the ones who end up picking up the trash, people from the community ended up picking up our mess.” Others proposed other tried mechanism, like climbing up the rooftops to throw rocks and yell chants. After a while, they agreed: “We have to find another way.” And reflecting some of the political breadth he claimed characterized his outlook, Earles asked an adeco friend to join him, his brother, and a third friend in staging a hijacking. After going door to door alerting neighbors of their deed, and their intentions not to burn the truck but rather to use it as leverage, they successfully assembled the crowd of women that greeted police on their arrival.

On Monday 21 December, however, no signs of the promised clean up had materialized. Neighbors then reportedly staged an emergency assembly, and agreed to hijack “everywhere and anyone who had anything to do with” the problems in the 23 de

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68 Gutiérrez.
enero. Meanwhile their tactics became more militant, using weapons and taking to major roads, not just in the 23 de enero, in search of passing trucks from the electric service, telephone and water companies, and the press. Still, their support increased, especially among those with little record of participation. “Blocks 1 and 2 were the most reactionary. Later they participated the most. That shows that we had a wrong political approach to things.” Even one AD militant who had collaborated with an underground anti-guerrilla movement in the 1960s joined in. For Earles the reasons were clear: “It was a matter of services … everyone was affected.” But that did not mean that the kind of revolutionary politics they had espoused were out of the picture: “We took advantage of that situation, yes. We went in deep into every building, [and it was] excellent. We achieved a knockout punch (tubazo) … From twelve organizers in blocks no. 1 through 7, we went to nearly 200 overnight … Even in block no. 1 where he never had anything, we ended up controlling thirty apartments.”

By the next day, news of the secuestros was picked up by all major national dailies. The popular Ultimas Noticias gave the protest a full page spread, sympathetically reporting on their demands while stressing the difference between the violence that had characterized previous mobilizations, even as recently as a week earlier.\(^\text{69}\) El Nacional devoted several pictures and a headline of “Tons of Trash in el 23” to the protest,\(^\text{70}\) while El Universal, whose truck was among the hijacked, wrote of “a disaster of trash” in the 23 de enero as residents had yet to receive the “Christmas bonus … promised by the

\(^{69}\) Cruz Moreno, “Por Segundo Dia Consecutivo En El Oeste: Retenidos 3 Camiones Y Un Jeep De La Basura Por Habitantes De Sierra Maestra Como Protesta,” Ultimas Noticias, 22 December 1981.

IMAU director.”71 And indeed, asked by reporters why they had undertaken to hijack the property of the state, neighbors replied: “[our] action is an opportune contribution to help contractors fulfill their promise to ‘clean Caracas in December.’”72

In the discourse of the hijackings the “radical” character of neighbors’ methods seemed not to defy but rather to rely on their loyalty to the institutional structure of representative government; it derived its power not by challenging the legitimacy of the state but rather by appropriating its own logic of accountability. From the viewpoint of the state this modality marked a significant enough departure from prior narratives of violent protest to limit severely the repressive response that had marked its approach to the 23 de enero throughout the year. On 23 December, Luis Herrera Campins made a dramatic intervention. Caracas’s major daily blared on its front page: “[Herrera Campins], ‘furios,’ gave public services 48 hours.” The announcement followed a “stormy” emergency meeting called by Herrera Campins between the Caracas governor and the heads of public service institutions. According to the President’s chief of staff, Asdrubal Aguiar, “Herrera Campins understood that the protests that happened in the 23 de enero and other areas of the capital were not to ‘alter public order.’” Instead, they were the “natural reaction of a community that feels unattended in its basic needs.” Aguiar went further, noting that by “express orders” from the President, there was to be “no retaliation against protesters.” Instead, he ordered the agencies to sign “an affidavit


72 “Los vecinos dijeron que su acción se convierte en una contribución oportuna al cumplimiento de la promesa de los concesionarios de la recolección de basura de ‘limpiar a Caracas en Diciembre.’ "Secuestraron a Cuatro Camiones Del I.M.A.U."
of commitment” so that in 48 hours’ time they would attend to the public services of the 23 de enero in particular, but also other areas of Caracas in order “to detect irregularities before they reach critical levels, as they did in the 23 de enero.”

Over the next two days, IMAU authorities reportedly deployed nearly 200 trucks and two dozen bulldozers to the neighborhood (see figure 3). In addition, the water service dispatched crews to fix leaks in both sewer and water mains in Monte Piedad. Asked by reporters how they viewed the measure that had forced their presence, public service authorities on the scene coincided in stating that “Residents are perfectly justified in staging their protest.”

Comments like these helped to galvanize other popular sectors around Caracas, who pointed to the 23 de enero as they contemplated seeking solutions to long standing grievances of their own. In Caricuao, for example, another high rise working class community built in the early 1960s and located in southwestern Caracas, residents reported to press that “maybe the forms of pressure of the 23 de enero are more convincing.” But a sense of cultural disdain tempered an otherwise veiled admiration for what residents of the 23 de enero had undertaken, and the attention they had managed to receive. According to one local woman, “One day I told the people at INOS (water

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service) that if they didn’t send water, we were going to do the same thing as in the 23 de
enero. Of course it’s not that we want to act like them in the 23 de enero because … well
we are a more cultured area than the 23 de enero, but it looks like things in this country
can only by fixed a la mala (the wrong way).”77 And in fact, as the secuestros raged, state
agents resurfaced the discourse of participation. Addressing urban popular sectors in the
southern state of Guarico, Alba Illaramendi of Fundacomun once more urged
communities to seize the mantle of participation: “It is indispensable that [communities
themselves] promote, participate, and protect the work that is developed to resolve the
needs that you yourselves have pointed out.”78

Meanwhile in the 23 de enero, the clean-up measures begun before Christmas had
proven to be stopgaps at best. By 26 December all equipment and personnel had cleared
out while much trash remained uncollected. Meanwhile public service entities took to
accusing one another of ongoing problems in the 23 de enero, with IMAU officials
blaming the superblocks administrator, INAVI, of negligence.79 Papers reported on
neighbors’ frustrations. Said one, “we were taken for saps;”80 by New Year’s Eve others
seemed to lose hope they would ever resolve their “eternal calamities.”81

77 Argotte, “El Regalo De Caricuao Llego En Barriles De Basura: Otra Parroquia Que Amenaza Con Hacer Crisis Al Estilo 23 De Enero.”


80 Daisy Argotte, "No Funciono La Cayapa Para Limpiar El Sector: Los Habitantes Del 23 De Enero 'Cayeron Por Inocentes'," Diario de Caracas, 27 December 1981

In this light, beginning on 3 January, residents hijacked another slate of trucks, vans, and cars (see figure 5). To sustain the protest over time, neighbors relied on an intricate system of task sharing drawn from the 23 de enero’s multiple organizing traditions. Erstwhile guerrillas and militant youth formed the core of those who staged the roadblocks, seized the vehicles, and kept them guard overnight, drawing from their tactical experience forged in the fray of anti-establishment conflict, for instance by deflating tires so that the only way to move the trucks was to tow them out. According to Earles, all trucks seized were “assigned” to a building, whose residents then assumed responsibility for the truck. Meanwhile amas de casa, or housewives, gave the protest its public face, speaking to reporters about the nature of their specific grievances and following up to ensure the coverage was “fidedigno,” or fair. During daily assemblies at the various buildings in Monte Piedad where vehicles were being detained, the community at large discussed their options as days turned to weeks, also setting up guard shifts to ensure the vehicles’ safekeeping. When it seemed like attention to the protest was waning, and the state was ready to wait them out, neighbors organized mass rallies to which other sectors of the 23 de enero contributed “representatives” to assist with logistics and stand in solidarity.

But sustaining the protest took its toll. William Rangel, who alongside Earles had helped organize the secuestros, recalls that during nightly meetings with neighbors disputes routinely erupted as long standing personality conflicts flared up. Some even used the assemblies to vent marital problems, hinting at the level of intimacy that developed over time. In another instance, a National Guard general confronted some of
the youth militants over the release of one of the trucks. As tempers flared, guns flew, and only after several minutes did tensions ease. The general, meanwhile, left without the truck. From the jefatura civil, Josefina Delgado arrived to make a personal appeal to the youth spearheading the secuestros, including Juan Contreras whom Delgado had earlier advocated for when police detained him for participating in student protests at the Palacio Fajardo high school. But as Juan recalls the encounter, feeling emboldened, he and the others rebuffed Delgado. And when mid level public service officials showed up to an assembly where neighbors expected directors, one neighbor yelled “then you are also hijacked!” before the rest of the assembly talked him down.

But the major source of dispute remained what to do about the trucks. One sector, led by youth, advocated burning them. Another sector, led by adults, forbade it. At root lay a careful balancing act between pressure and violence, one that threatened to spillover at any moment. For instance on 9 January neighbors staged a demonstration aimed keeping up the pressure on authorities, and the media’s attention. But when unidentified gunmen shot at the crowd, leaving one woman wounded, some among youth militants argued that the time had come to fight violence with violence. Some even began burning tires to block the streets for several hours before other neighbors reminded them of the

82 William Rangel, Interview with author, 19 February 2005.
83 Contreras.
84 Frank León, Interview with author, 28 July 2005.
fragility of their alliance. By 17 January, to show they continued undeterred, residents seized another three public service trucks.

Their resolve paid off. In an assembly on 19 January at a local elementary school, 400 residents filled the dining hall to witness as the directors of the IMAU, INOS, and electric service signed affidavits guaranteeing that they would commit enough resources to conduct a complete, long term overhaul of the neighborhood. Four days later, 24 years since the overthrow of Pérez Jiménez had set Venezuela on a path towards democracy, residents celebrated as the first of the crews began work, and the last of the trucks rolled out. Asked if they had lost an opportunity to build a political movement, Frank León, one of the youth militants, admitted they had, to an extent. “There were frustrations,” he said. But “it was politicized in that people identified you as revolutionary, they respected you.” But above all, said Frank, “we had the satisfaction that we achieved what we set out to do.”

“A Weapon as Powerful as the Vote”: Aftermath

In the immediate aftermath of the secuestros the Caracas city council debated the merits of residents’ tactics. Its president denounced the measure as “beyond all


established order, it is lamentable that this should take place for the simple reason that it has negative consequences … especially when there are perfectly acceptable mechanisms to reach an understanding.” A Christian Democrat councilman concurred, criticizing residents for presumably acting against their own interests by letting themselves be manipulated: “By no means do I think violence is the solution … If the community allows itself to be taken by activists who don’t want solutions to problems because they live off of that cauldron, they will never be able to live decently.” A councilman for the MAS party offered lackluster empathy while counseling dialogue: “I understand that what took place in the 23 de enero is a reflection of dramatic neglect that affects the people of that area, forced to use extreme measures, even though I think that the correct approach would be to attack the root of the matter and the most convenient initiative to that end is dialogue.” But Gladys Gavazut, an independent, broke ranks and issued a blanket condemnation of the council while lending full support to residents’ measures:

The Council has ceased to be a popular instrument to become a museum instead, and the participation offered by [the government] was nothing more than a ploy that was discarded when they realized that it might be useful for the people to hold accountable, at a given time, those who direct the fortunes of the nation … I justify [the secuestros] and even more in the case of a neighborhood that has been so beaten. The time comes when a community tires and takes actions that are the externalization of a pueblo that cannot find solutions to the problems it faces.89

In the press, columnists reflected on the underlying implications of the secuestros. Artist Manuel Manaure, who years earlier had collaborated in the design of the superblocks, offered a scathing rebuke of public officials who would fail to see the larger problems of

89 All city council quotes from: Lombardi, "Se Justifica El Secuestro De Un Camion?."
representation exposed by residents’ protest, opting instead to focus on the legal aspects of the *secuestros*: “they are the symbols of a *pueblo* … that continues to hang on to the hope that Venezuela will go down the path of authentic legality… The very fact that there exists a popular sector like the 23 de enero, which keeps alit the torch of just claims, is living proof that the light of hope has not died out. It is also testimony that there is a Venezuela that is beaten, but not defeated.” For Manaure the implication was a clear portent of things to come: “This community will have within a short time the opportunity, once more, to use efficiently and wisely, a weapon as powerful as the vote is in a democracy. We are certain they will use it in the next elections with reflective criteria, as a crushing protest in the face of the cruel injustices it has endured.”

Manaure’s exhortation to view the *secuestros* as a larger commentary on the broken pacts between the state and its citizens, and to view the illegality of the *secuestros* ironically as a plea for “authentic legality,” laid bare a deeper reality about the 23 de enero: that residents could mobilize political sectors on behalf of a democratic claim even while engaging in extra-legal tactics reflected their paradoxically privileged position vis-à-vis a state by which they felt ignored. In this space, between the “civic” attributes of their claims and the uncivil character of their means, neighbors experimented with how to respond to the effects of a coming economic crisis. Indeed, by hijacking the property of the state while adopting its logic of accountability, residents of the 23 de enero were marking not just a new modality of protest but also the emergence of a new consciousness of participatory politics in Venezuela.

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Over the next few years, this modality would find expression in debates among the more militant wing of activists in the 23 de enero: how – if at all – to combine social and political organizing in their community. The debate reflected a synthesis in the dialectic between political and community work that had marked the previous decades of activism. Consider the case of the Grupo de Trabajo La Piedrita (GTLP). La Piedrita emerged from one of the oldest squatter settlements in el 23. It sits strategically at the crossroads of four sectors of el 23, which rendered it a favored spot for criminal, and especially narcotics, activity during the early 1980s. By the mid-80s neighbors formed a “working group” to seek collective solutions to a scourge threatening to unravel their once close-knit community, a phenomenon playing out throughout el 23. Their response was two-fold: on one hand, renew a sense of pride and solidarity in their community through the organization of festivals for local youth, the formation of a “muralist brigade” to propagate messages of solidarity, and the construction of a commons where strict rules of conduct were observed and imparted to all members; on the other hand, exercise police action against criminal elements, whether or not they came from outside the neighborhood.

On the face of it, then, the GTLP arose as a primarily social response to crime and its consequences for community life. In fact, politics underlay nearly every facet of the GTLP’s trajectory, from its inception to its strategies to its goals. For founders of the GTLP crime and drugs in the 23 de enero were but another, if effective, face of state repression. In this they coincided with a widely held perception in the parish that government policy to neutralize dissidence in the 23 de enero explained the explosive
rise of violent delinquency starting in the mid-70s. In their cultural work the GTLP likewise incorporated music and images reflecting demands for social justice, rebukes of representative democracy, rejection of state violence, and the memorialization of activists gunned down either by thugs or police. But especially in their police actions the GTLP drew directly from a tactical repertoire that picked up from the associations that some members forged in the 1970s with veterans of the so-called Unidades Tácticas de Combate (1960s Tactical Combat Units) living in or near their community.\(^\text{91}\)

Elsewhere in the 23 de enero, residents engaged in similar forms of organizing, politically informed but community oriented. In Block 37 of the Zona F, for instance, neighbors organized into self-defense brigades to curb the impact of druf trafficking in their area (see Figure 16). As with the GTLP, the surface actions of residents organizing to defend their communities spoke of an effort with few overt signs of political content. But as Alirio Moreno, one of the organizers of the self-defense brigades who later went on to preside the building’s neighbors’ association, recalled, the building’s self-defense brigades were comprised primarily of residents disenchanted with what they viewed as neighborhood associations rendered ineffective by squabbles between AD and COPEI partisans. Taking measures into their own hands while still collaborating with police was in this context aimed both at safeguarding their community and to critique the state’s inability to undertake even the most basic functions of governance, like security.\(^\text{92}\) Their actions would lead those involved in the brigades to overhaul the discredited residents’


\(^{92}\) Alirio Moreno, Interview with Author, 1 June 2005.
association, and through elections claim the leadership of the revitalized group. It was a pattern repeated in Blocks 42-43-44, as residents there also engaged in similar forms of anti-drug campaigns in the mid 1980s. And in La Cañada, Juan Contreras, once a youth radical and among the leaders of the secuestros would by the late 1980s join with friends in Block 19 to vie for the leadership of his building’s neighborhood association. They developed a platform and canvassed their building, apartment by apartment. The group won, and Juan claimed the presidency of the association, edging out tickets aligned with AD and COPEI. During their tenure, the youth block worked alongside former association members to implement youth outreach programs, organize weekend clean up brigades, and lobby the jefatura civil for resources to effect structural improvements to the building. “We were very cognizant,” recalls Juan, “that we were setting an example as an alternative to the major parties.” Over time, they shed their image as youthful trouble makers, garnering the support of broad sectors of the community and eventually securing reelection. The vote had proven a powerful weapon indeed.

Conclusion

Events like the secuestros and their aftermath show that the process of recalibrating representative democracy in Venezuela as it frayed involved far more negotiation between state and electorate than conventional accounts propose. They also


94 Juan B. Contreras Suniaga, "La Coordinadora Cultural Simón Bolívar: Una Experiencia De Construcción De Poder Local En La Parroquia 23 De Enero" (Tésis de Grado, Universidad Central de Venezuela, 2000).
suggest that demobilization and patronage scarcely account for how some sectors responded. In addition, they lay bare that the process began long before the state faced the worst of the economic crisis that would later engulf it, and involved not just economic revendications but also political claims, in particular for better government. Like political elites, popular sectors also experimented with a new language and tactics of mobilization in response to the effects of structural shifts taking place around them. These responses drew from competing traditions of grassroots organizing long gestating in the underbelly of Venezuelan democracy, at once liberal in its ends, but radical in its means. As sectors that had long shunned and done battle with the state sought, their response was tempered by a second current, one that had long supported the premises of liberal democracy and its promise of good governance as citizens were urged to hold the state and its institutions accountable to its responsibilities to the electorate.

To bring together these currents they had drawn strength from two unexpected sources. The first came courtesy of the state itself. Herrera Campins had been elected on a promise to bring more participation to the political system, in turn breeding accountability. By 1981, Herrera had abandoned the calls to “reinvent democracy” that informed his presidential bid. Yet the vision of a “participative” politics proved a lasting stimulus for popular mobilization. In particular, it conferred powerful legitimacy – and leverage – to even the boldest popular efforts to defy political elites and their grip on power. It was precisely this mantle of legitimacy that residents of the 23 de enero would seize to mount such an effort. The second unexpected source of strength came from within the parish. While the call to organize and claim more participation provided a
stimulus to challenge long held assumptions about state power and its legitimate arbiters, it nevertheless presented residents of the 23 de enero with a challenge of their own: how to go about organizing. Indeed for decades the neighborhood had developed a reputation as a hotbed of mobilization, political and otherwise. Yet this image belied stark differences in tactics, goals, and participation among currents of activism broadly brushed as ‘radical.’ More importantly, it underestimated the scope and strength of local networks of support for the pacted system, which the 1978 elections confirmed as never before. In short, while mobilization had marked the 23 de enero’s place in the national imagination, organization among its residents had long proven elusive. In the secuestros, residents found ways to bring together these once-clashing currents, drawing strategically from each to transform local heterogeneity from a liability into an asset.

The success of the secuestros transformed more than the physical face of the 23 de enero. In their wake a new era of popular mobilization ensued, one where community struggles were imbued with political content as usually mainstream sectors embraced a leadership and tactical repertoire fashioned around radical ideological goals. But these sectors also placed limits upon insurgent leaders and tactics, forcing once anti-establishment groups into negotiating with Venezuela’s state. As community activists gained a radical political edge, one-time insurgents came to recognize the legitimacy of the representative system. The result was a hybrid political consciousness that held direct action tactics and loyalty to the founding premises – and promises – of liberal democracy as complementary rather than antithetical. By hijacking the property of the state while adopting its logic of accountability, residents of the 23 de enero were marking not just a
new modality of protest but also the emergence of a new consciousness of participatory politics in Venezuela.
Chapter Five

From One to Many Caracazos: The Experiences of the 23 de enero

Seven years after helping to organize the secuestros in the 23 de enero, William Rangel found himself at the center of Venezuela’s largest urban protest. On Monday 27 February 1989, William had set out from his apartment in Monte Piedad to the Parque Central business and residential complex in downtown Caracas. “I was looking for work,” he recalls. “Suddenly … I saw more than a hundred motorcyclists. ‘Something is happening,’ I thought. ‘This isn’t normal, something is going on here.’”

When he tried to board a bus back to the 23 de enero a friend alerted him: “Look, there’s no transportation. They’re burning buses in Guatire and Guarenas.”

Indeed, earlier that morning in the two bedroom communities located some twenty minutes east of Caracas, students and workers en route to the capital had begun to set afire buses in protest over fare hikes that far exceeded – sometimes doubling or more – new rates officially announced just days earlier. Taxi driver Carlos Quintana of Block 11 in Monte Piedad was there, visiting family in the Menca de Leóni housing complex in Guarenas where the first protests began. “A mess [lío] started around 5 in the morning with a guy saying, ‘no that can’t be, how are you going to charge so much for the fares,’ this and that. And the people rose up [se amotinó] and the problems started with the bus drivers and that it is where it was unleashed, right there, what later happened in all Venezuela.”

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1 Rangel.

2 Carlos Quintana, Interview with author, 29 January 2005.
Over the next several hours, news of events in Guarenas traveled by telephone, television, and motorcycle to Caracas. By mid morning signs of unrest in the capital had emerged in the Parque Central area where William was looking for work, located near the terminal for buses covering the Guarenas and Guatire route.\(^\text{3}\) By noon a truck carrying groceries lay looted, while demonstrators stopped traffic in the nearby Francisco Fajardo highway that connects east and west Caracas. Around 1 PM as the crowd in Parque Central grew in size and agitation, police opened fire, killing 22 year old university student Yulimar Reyes. Meanwhile Freddy Parra, from the Mirador sector of the 23 de enero and a student at the Universidad Central de Venezuela, took a bullet in the leg while he protested the fare hikes in the nearby Plaza Venezuela.\(^\text{4}\) That police in two different albeit nearby sectors of Caracas opened fire on demonstrators reflected a rapid escalation of events, as well as sheer unpreparedness by the security apparatus.\(^\text{5}\) Indeed by 6 PM, according to later figures offered by Venezuela’s Minister of Defense, 65 were dead, none among them police.\(^\text{6}\) And as the violence escalated and more and more buses and trucks went up in flames or succumbed to looters, public transportation in Caracas stopped, forcing people like William to walk back to the 23 de enero.


\(^\text{4}\) Contreras, Ojeda, "Saqueos Y Barricadas," 27.


It was the same for Juan Contreras of La Cañada, then in his twenties and “caught” by the events in east Caracas. It would take Juan and a friend until late evening and a circuitous route by car, bus, and foot to return to the 23 de enero. Along the way, they “saw all the scenes. Burned cars, chaos, people looting … we were desperate to get home.” As they neared the neighborhood, they stood and watched as “all the stores on Avenida Sucre were being looted.” When they finally arrived in the 23 de enero Juan and his friend found “all the streets blocked,” while in La Cañada itself, a trash truck lay afire outside the Agua Salud Metro station, which had earlier shut its doors in the face of the protests gripping Caracas. Ramón Molinés was there as well. He had come from Block 1 of Monte Piedad on hearing of the burned truck. Stressing the same sense of stunned observation that had overtaken Juan in Avenida Sucre, he remembers, “All we did was watch, we were there as spectators.” And yet by evening in Monte Piedad, as William finally made his way back, a tense calm reigned. “When I arrived here … things were peaceful,” William recalls. “But you could smell in the air, in the environment, that something was happening.”

The contours of what “was happening” would take shape over the next five days as Venezuela broadly, but Caracas in particular, fell victim to the deadliest wave of protest, violence, and repression since the nation’s mid nineteenth-century civil war. Indeed by nightfall on 27 February President Carlos Andrés Pérez authorized the

7 Contreras.
8 Julio Ricardo Villaroel et al., Interview with author, 29 January 2005.
9 Rangel.
deployment of Army troops to “restore order” to the capital. The following day nearly 9000 soldiers arriving from posts along the border with Colombia and in the interior of Venezuela took positions in key areas of Caracas – including in and around the 23 de enero, located next to the Presidential Palace.\footnote{Demanda Ante La Corte Interamericana De Derechos Humanos Contra La Republica De Venezuela: Caso De Miguel Aguilera, Wolfgang Quintana, Richard Paez Y Otros, Box: Caso del Caracazo (Aguilera la Rosa), Original, Fondo, Tomo I y II Folder: CIADH Caso Aguilera la Rosa C/Venezuela, Fondo, Tomo I, Original 000002-136, 6-7 (1999).} As they deployed Pérez, with the support of Venezuela’s major political factions, suspended constitutional rights for the first time since the era of guerrilla warfare in the early 1960s.\footnote{Clodovaldo Hernández, "Copei Respaldó Decreto De C.A.P. Para Suspensión De Las Garantías," \textit{Diario de Caracas}, 11 March 1989. The Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS, Movement Towards Socialism) and Movimiento Electoral del Pueblo (MEP, People’s Electoral Movement) both supported the unfolding protests. "M.A.S. Y M.E.P. Fijaron Su Posición," \textit{Diario de Caracas}, 28 February 1989.} At the same time a 6 AM to 6 PM curfew went into effect. By nightfall on 28 February Caracas was militarized, under curfew, and its residents were deprived of legal rights. Mass repression followed. Bodies pierced by high caliber bullets corresponding to military rifles began to pile up by the dozens in city hospitals. Overwhelmed, city morgue officials hurriedly placed unclaimed bodies in mass graves.\footnote{According to Italo del Valle Alliegro, Defense Minister during the Caracazo, 65 deaths from 7.65mm caliber bullets – standard issue for Venezuela’s Army at the time – took place between 28 February and 5 March 1989. Of the 65 deaths by high caliber rifles, as many as 47 took place between 28 February and 1 March. \textit{Demanda Ante La Corte Interamericana De Derechos Humanos}, 5, 13, 19.} By the time authorities lifted the curfew and restored most constitutional provisions on 11 March, the official death toll stood at 276, among them two military officers and one police captain, the latter gunned down in clashes with gunmen in the La Cañada sector of the 23 de enero.\footnote{Congress lifted the final restrictions on constitutional guarantees on 22 March. After assembling all reports of deaths during the period 27 February-5 March, local human rights groups PROVEA and COFAVIC placed the figure of casualties during the Caracazo at 399. In 1991, they added another 69 names after the discovery of mass graves in the La Peste area of Caracas, bringing the total to 468. Ibid., 7.}
This chapter examines the lived experience of residents of the 23 de enero during the week of 27 February 1989. Memorialized as the Caracazo, the period has universally been imagined as a turning point in Venezuelan history, exposing a deep fissure in the social pact between political elites and the electorate established in the wake of the democratic revolution that ousted Pérez Jiménez in 1958. In the ensuing years, even as the Caracazo’s significance as an independent indicator of systemic strain was overtaken by failed coups, financial meltdowns, and presidential impeachments that seemed to address more directly the institutional unsoundness of Venezuelan democracy, its basic transcendental quality remained constant in conventional appraisals. 

Thus identified, the most recent official accounting of the dead, conducted during the presidency of Hugo Chávez, places the figure at 348, drawing upon all case files culled from the Attorney General’s office. German Mundarain, “A 18 Años Del Caracazo: Sed De Justicia,” (Caracas: Defensoría del Pueblo, 2007), 66.

To date, book-length, comprehensive treatments of the Caracazo remain absent from the literature on contemporary Venezuela. Shorter analyses, though more plentiful, likewise remain marked by uneven quality and focus. In the immediate aftermath, two leading social science journals based at the Universidad Central de Venezuela devoted special issues to the Caracazo, its political dimensions, and its foreseeable short and long term consequences. See: Politeia 15, no. July (1989), Cuadernos del CENDES 10, no. January-April (1989). In separate essays, historian Miguel Izard, and anthropologists Fernando Coronil and Julie Skurski sought to situate the Caracazo within a broader historical context, tracing the roots of popular discontent to the early 1980s, and the roots of state violence to the Amparo massacre of eleven peasants by elite military units in the southeastern Colombian border just months prior to the Caracazo. Their argument represented an early revisionist perspective to an already standard interpretation of the Caracazo as a watershed moment in modern Venezuelan history. See: Coronil and Skurski, “Dismembering and Remembering the Nation.”, Miguel Izard, El Poder, La Mentira Y La Muerte: De El Amparo Al Caracazo (Caracas: Fondo Editorial Tropykos, 1991). Following two failed coup d’etat attempts on the government of Carlos Andrés Pérez in 1992, an emerging national and international literature on Venezuela’s “crisis” moved away from casting the Caracazo as a foundational moment of a new national narrative, and instead marginalized its significance altogether vis-à-vis the now real possibility that a long-touted system marked by institutional resilience might crumble from within rather than from popular pressure. Yet the only sustained analysis of the Caracazo’s popular significance suggested otherwise. Five years following the massacre, sociologist José Maria Cadenas conducted in-depth interviews with children in popular sectors of Caracas most targeted by military forces, in an effort to uncover patterns of “psycho-social trauma” resulting from the acts of state repression. His research revealed surprisingly consistent structures of feeling among children of various ages and from diverse parts of Caracas, for whom memories of the Caracazo evoked strong emotions of fear expressed in efforts to forget the events. See: José María Cadenas G, El 27 De Febrero Contado Por Niños Y Adolescentes (Caracas: Fondo Editorial Trópykos, 1995). Under the aegis of what may be termed “protest” studies, and influenced by official state policy under the government of Hugo Chávez to cast the Caracazo as a moment of popular political catharsis, the 1989 massacre has seen a resurgence in academic attention. This new
the Caracazo became an abstraction, a stand-in for the accumulated problems of the
democratic system as a whole and emblematic of the broken pacts between state and
citizenry that would eventually occasion its collapse. Rendered and deployed as a device,
the Caracazo lost its specificity, and it is in that specificity that clues about why the
Caracazo proved a turning point emerge. Indeed, to look more closely – and narrowly –
at the week-long events is to see the full dimensions of that fissure and to rethink the
ineluctability that came to be associated with the Caracazo. In other words, it did not
immediately follow that the Caracazo would lead to the collapse of the political order
established after 1958. Only by considering the specific ways in which the events
constituted a break from preexisting norms of what was and was not expected, from both
state and populace, do the full implications of the Caracazo become apparent.

Set against the backdrop of the 23 de enero’s history with Venezuela’s
government – marked as it was by the strategic interplay of conflict and consensus – this
chapter offers a reading of the Caracazo that highlights the contingent rather than
totalizing aspects of the events. What emerges is a picture of not one but many
Caracazos. Indeed when coupled, the death of police captain Eduardo Mesa Istúriz and
expressions of surprise by seasoned veterans of local struggles like William well reflect
how much the events of February and March 1989 outpaced imagined norms of
acceptable behavior between the state and its citizens, even in a neighborhood with as
deep a history of struggle as the 23 de enero. The routinization of conflict in the

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effort, however, remains rooted in institutional and political analysis and has yet to integrate the social
dimensions or the long-developing historical foundations of the Caracazo. See: Lopez Maya, “The
Venezuelan Caracazo of 1989: Popular Protest and Institutional Weakness.”

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preceding three decades had rendered elastic the boundaries both of the possible, and the predictable, in the 23 de enero’s relationship with the state. If anything, events like the secuestros in the preceding decade – where majority participation in the two-party electoral system had expanded the range of legitimate expressions of grievance making that fell outside institutional channels – seemed to forestall the possibility of the kind of violence that would grip the neighborhood.

But in a context of generalized upheaval old patterns fast lost currency. A trash truck afire like the one that greeted Juan and Ramón in La Cañada was hardly novel as William could well attest, but against the backdrop of a city in flames it gained more significance. Deadly clashes between students and police had marked much of the 1970s, but police had not been among the dead as was Istúriz. Military occupation, too, had precedents in the early 1960s, but images of three floor segments peppered by hundreds of 50 caliber rounds fired indiscriminately had no parallel (see Figure 17). Even the violent death of local youth was not uncommon, including ones like that of 8 year old Francisco Moncada of Atlántico Norte, shot on the afternoon of 28 February. But bodies strewn on the streets for hours, even overnight, as a result of intense gunfire indicated a different order of brutality (see Figure 19). Reflecting on the violence weeks later, local AD leader Trina Quevedo noted: “I don’t understand why the Army unleashed on us in this way, because we’ve always had disturbances and agitators here, and the police come and seize the blocks and control them in an hour.”

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The vast gulf separating the state’s response from residents’ expectations – in turn founded on decades of experience – exposed how the remarkable elasticity established during the thirty year relationship between the state and residents of the neighborhood lay shattered. This dynamic also had a parallel, but not one that authorities likely cared to admit. It was the violence which thirty years earlier Pérez Jiménez had unleashed as a last gasp of a dying regime, leading to its ouster and “democratic revolution.”

Voting for Hope: The 1988 Elections and Carlos Andrés Pérez’s Return

Quevedo’s disbelief at the state’s response revealed a dramatic transition from hopeful anticipation, to fast escalating protest, to repression on a scale unknown and in fact, unimaginined. This sense of complete surprise beset all levels of Venezuelan society during the last two days of February 1989. Indeed on the evening of 27 February, well after the outbreak of protest in Caracas, President Carlos Andrés Pérez had flown to the plains city of Barquisimeto to address a meeting of the Venezuelan Executives Association. He had done so despite awareness of the growing signs of unrest, according to Pérez’s executive secretary Ignacio Betancourt, who had received calls throughout the day from Ministers and other officials alerting Pérez to what was transpiring. But “the President didn’t believe it.” Once shown footage of looters and demonstrators in Caracas, Pérez again dismissed the events as old news: “That was at noon … By this time everything has calmed down.”¹⁶ Later addressing the executives meeting, Pérez once

more downplayed what was taking place. “There is nothing to be alarmed about,” he told them. “We are going to take advantage of the crisis to generate wellbeing.”

That Pérez’s initial response was to minimize events while sounding a call to generate “wellbeing,” spoke less about ineptitude than it did about both the unanticipated nature of the events, and Pérez’s continuing sense of confidence and optimism just days after taking office. Indeed three months earlier on 4 December 1988, Venezuelans had swept the AD candidate into the presidency, capping his return to executive office after presiding over Venezuela during a period of rapid growth in the mid 1970s. His election marked the seventh time since the democratic revolution that ousted Dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez that Venezuelans had taken to the polls to pick their president, cementing the country’s image as “the region’s showcase democracy.”

It also reflected a collective desire for a return to days remembered as prosperous, albeit against the backdrop of nearly a decade of deep economic recession unleashed after the devaluation of Venezuela’s currency in 1983, late in the administration of Luis Herrera Campins. And, in fact, Pérez’s inauguration on 2 February 1989 had sought to signal Venezuela’s reentry in the world stage, drawing 22 heads of state and dozens of dignitaries from around the world. Among them was Fidel Castro, whose fleeting one-day visit marked a departure from the euphoric scenes that accompanied his arrival in Caracas thirty years earlier. Asked by reporters about his thoughts on Pérez, Castro responded: “He is aware

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of the problems he has to face … He was very optimistic and enthused with the work he wants to accomplish.” In short, it was a time of optimism as Venezuelans readied to turn the page on a difficult decade.

Two weeks later on 17 February, Pérez announced a series of economic reforms designed to allay the massive debt contracted, ironically, during his first term in office between 1973 and 1979. During this era, high oil prices had created an illusion of unlimited wealth among Venezuelan political elites, which led to large public spending and corruption to match. But contracting oil prices in the 1980s had left Venezuela with little income to meet its staggering debt obligations, forcing cuts in social spending and measures such as the devaluation of the currency in 1983 in order to steer resources into servicing the foreign debt. By 1988, inflation rates of 35 percent and poverty rates of 70 percent, and a debt-to-GDP ratio of 40 percent reflected the combined effect of economic crisis. In addition, Pérez’s predecessor had decimated Venezuela’s foreign reserves, which at $300 million was dwarfed by the country’s $34 billion debt. Facing national bankruptcy, Pérez negotiated a $4.5 billion loan package with the International Monetary Fund, agreeing to enact a series of austerity measures that included raising gasoline prices and public utility fees, and lifting price controls on all but the most basic goods. Anticipating the derivative effects of higher gasoline prices, Pérez also authorized a 30 percent increase in the price of public transportation, which he offset by a 30 percent increase in the minimum wage for public service employees. Somber but hopeful, his speech betrayed no lack of confidence or certainty about the need to carry out these

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measures, concluding with the same fiery phrase that had been his campaign slogan: “manos a la obra!” (Let’s get to work). It did, however, break with campaign promises not to negotiate with the IMF, which he reportedly called “the bomb that only kills people.”

At the 23 de enero, Trina Quevedo had much to feel hopeful about in Venezuela’s new president, and direction. As a local AD leader in Block 1 of Monte Piedad, she had helped Pérez win in the 23 de enero, consolidating its shift from a sector whose relationship with AD had at best been strained, to one where the party was now dominant. This was no small feat. Indeed in 1983, the overwhelming victory of AD’s Jaime Lusinchi in the neighborhood, as in the rest of Venezuela, had resulted from a large scale repudiation of Herrera Campins’s administration across all national sectors, one which irreparably tarnished the image of COPEI despite the party’s efforts to distance itself from the President. This dynamic helped account for Lusinchi’s 22 point drubbing of Rafael Caldera, who was running for a second term in office under a proposition of returning to better times that was similar to the one Carlos Andrés Pérez would attempt in 1988 (see Table 2). In the 23 de enero, Lusinchi’s margin of victory had been greater still, 24 points. But during Lusinchi’s administration the problems that had plagued Herrera Campins – rising inflation, poverty, and unemployment – only worsened. As such, warding off another protest vote in 1988 such as the one that decimated COPEI in 1983 seemed like a tall order. And in fact, COPEI recovered across

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the board in the 23 de enero in 1988: its candidate Eduardo Fernández received 37 percent of the vote to Caldera’s 29 percent in 1983, and the party as a whole increased 2 percent with respect to 1983. Still, Pérez and AD staged a decisive victory nonetheless. On election night 1988, Pérez came away with 52 percent of the vote in the 23 de enero. This represented the second time that an AD candidate had won a majority in the neighborhood, and only the third time in the neighborhood’s experience with elections that a majority of its residents had supported one candidate (the other being Larrazábal in 1958). Indeed, compared to Lusinchi’s 52 percent in 1983, the party’s candidate had remained statistically even.

At the national level, Pérez’s victory despite his predecessor’s performance was a testament to his success in transcending party labels and creating a message of optimism that harkened to a time in the 1970s when high oil prices had propelled Venezuela to the center of the world stage, led by a hyper-presidential administration. But in the 23 de enero, it also attested to local party activists’ ability to mobilize a now well oiled machine around a candidate whose earlier presidency had been far from propitious. Indeed as chapter three revealed, Pérez’s presidency from 1973 to 1979 was a time of deadly student protests and worsening infrastructure in the 23 de enero, in the context of their first ever mass embrace of AD/COPEI, and in particular AD which edged out COPEI by just over a point (see Table 1). When set against the backdrop of an imaginary of national greatness, the 23 de enero’s experience under Pérez in the mid 1970s had created a deep fissure between discourse and reality. Over time, this fissure manifested itself in

the turn towards COPEI’s Luis Herrera Campins that marked the elections of 1978. Herrera Campins promised greater participation in contrast to Pérez’s hyper-presidentialism, which he again invoked as the way to rein in Venezuela’s many problems. In this sense, Pérez’s 1988 victory in the 23 de enero constituted a remarkable turn that suggested that residents in the neighborhood were willing to take a chance with Pérez not because of but despite their prior experience.

Beyond Pérez’s successful electoral run, signs of growing doubt both about AD and about the political system within which AD and COPEI had traded power since 1959 also revealed themselves in the 1988 elections. As Graph 5 indicates, voting trends nationally and in the 23 de enero belied the electoral domination suggested by Pérez’s 52 percent win in the neighborhood, and 55 percent win in Venezuela. Indeed, congressional vote figures for the 23 de enero highlighted an electoral pattern marked by three stages. In the first, between 1958 and 1973, AD and COPEI remained marginal parties in the 23 de enero, never amassing more than 30 percent combined, and losing handily to parties that fared poorly nationally (see Graph 2: Larrazábal’s URD in 1958, Larrazábal’s IPFN in 1963, and Pérez Jiménez’s CCN in 1968). A second stage, between 1973 and 1983, brought the rapid rise of AD and COPEI as the neighborhood’s major parties, combining to receive between 60 and 70 percent of the vote. But the 1988 elections, heralding a third stage, exposed a dip in preferences for AD/COPEI vis-à-vis other parties, marking the first time since 1963, following Betancourt’s presidency, that the two parties had posted lower returns than in the previous electoral cycle. Between 1983 and 1988, AD’s vote fell four points, while COPEI’s improved only by two points.
Abstention also increased during this time, to 19 percent compared to 12 percent in 1983, mirroring national figures.\textsuperscript{23}

Taken together, results of the 1988 elections held indications of concern, but the overarching sentiment remained one of resignation about the reforms needed to correct, at once and as a whole, Venezuela’s “profound accumulated disequilibria” according to Pérez. In the days following his 17 February announcement, few signs of popular unrest emerged, though a slew of alarms surfaced. Politicians of the left warned that despite the absent of protest “popular sectors are terrified with the government’s economic announcements.”\textsuperscript{24} Academics like Hector Silva Michelena, who in the early 1970’s had called Venezuela’s democracy an “illusion” based on an unsustainable dependency, noted that the conditions were ripe for a “grave social explosion.”\textsuperscript{25} Meanwhile more concrete signs of alarm also revealed themselves, as capital city doctors warned that the the economic “package” was curtailing their ability to budget, leaving hospitals “paralyzed.”\textsuperscript{26} By 21 February, the medical workers’ guild announced an imminent closure of medical facilities in the capital since “most Caracas hospitals cannot guarantee the health or life of their patients because they lack the necessary resources.”\textsuperscript{27}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{26} Fabiola Sánchez, "Paralizados Hospitales Por Culpa Del 'Paquete',' \textit{El Mundo}, 16 February 1989.
\end{thebibliography}
Still, plans to enact the first wave of reforms on 27 February went ahead. On the morning protests broke out, Planning Minister Miguel Rodriguez was at the International Monetary Fund in Washington, there to sign a letter of intent formally committing Venezuela to the loan regime Pérez had announced ten days earlier. In a page-long interview published the same day in a local paper, Rodriguez sounded an optimistic note, stressing that by “1990 the economic plan will mature.” All told, perhaps the clearest marker of the sentiment on the days before 27 February came weeks after, as officials and others struggled to make sense of what had transpired, and how they had responded. Addressing a congressional committee convened to investigate the events, Minister of Defense Italo del Valle Alliegro summarized the sense of collective surprise, and resulting cognitive dissonance, linking a successful electoral event with the largest urban protest of Venezuela’s history: “Nothing suggested, just three months after elections which took place in complete normalcy, that events like these could happen.”

Capturing Difference in Image: Violence(s) in the 23 de enero

“That was very sad. I will tell you why.” Emilia de Pérez had lived in the 23 de enero since 1958. From her window on the eight floor of the Block 31 she had witnessed history many times over, some painful, some joyful. In January 1959 she watched as Fidel Castro triumphantly made his way into Caracas through the Avenida Sucre below. In the 1960s she peeked out as tanks and troops stationed below waged war against urban

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28 Betancourt, "El Caracazo."


guerrillas and overheard those who screamed “Pérez Jiménez, forgive us for we knew not what we were doing!” In the 1970s she could see below as students in the Manuel Palacios Fajardo high school, located next to her building, clashed with police, even as her own children fled the violence. And in the 1980s she watched as neighbors organized into brigades tied alleged criminals to trees below and beat them in a bid to stem the tide of drug dealing in the building. All told, it was a life lived in the fray of conflict, though none of it prepared her for what took place between 27 February and 3 March 1989. “I was horrified by the amount of dead people in the streets. It would dawn and people would be lying dead in the streets.” Indeed by week’s end, when the worst had passed and she made her way to work in the Cementerio sector of southwestern Caracas, Emilia vividly recalls how “As I was walking in the morning I would see the corpses lying about in the corners, barely covered over, in the alleys, lying about.” From her window, she could see as military troops dispatched to the 23 de enero relentlessly fired on Blocks 22-23 just down the road from her building. “Those Blocks were pure fire [candela]. Those Blocks had their walls full of holes … from the shots, because those people were very combative over there.” Asked what she thought of the scenes, Emilia flatly stated: “What was I going to think? That was something that had no logic. People, with stones, with bottles, and them with bullets? That’s unfair.”

In fact, a photo of the bullet ridden Block 22-23 was among the most searing and widely circulated of the thousands that emerged from the week of protests, looting, and

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31 Pérez.
repression between 27 February and 3 March 1989 (see Figure 17). The picture captures the effects of the militarization of the 23 de enero on 28 February 1989. Between 28 February and 1 March, Army troops nominally deployed to prevent looting in the Avenida Sucre claimed to have taken fire from sharpshooters positioned in the rooftops and apartments of the superblocks overhead. Clashes allegedly continued into the following day and night, until finally abating by Friday 3 March. In subsequent memorializations, images like this one contributed to the construction of a narrative of the Caracazo as the massacring of defenseless people by a state that had sacrificed its legitimacy with its citizens, and was seeking to rationalize its actions by pointing to sharpshooters. Douglas Blanco, who covered the events as a newspaper photographer, later commented on his experience in the neighborhood. “I was in the parts of El Valle and the 23 de enero where supposedly there were sharpshooters, but that business sounds strange to me. You can’t justify the shape in which those buildings in the 23 de enero were left with the machine gunning by military and police. Do you have to off a building to eliminate a supposed sharpshooter? That’s too much cruelty [ensañamiento].”

Indeed, the image is striking. It shows the north side of the superblock, facing the Avenida Sucre below. The top five floors are captured in the shot, and each floor displays a large amount of bullet holes, helping to give a sense of the kind of terror it must have been “to live among bullets,” in the words of one journalist who later

interviewed area residents.\textsuperscript{33} Serving as a stand in for “the” violence in the 23 de enero as a whole, the photo also helps to capture the larger problematic of conventional interpretations of the Caracazo. In fact, when examined more closely, specifics emerge that help to sharpen and deepen the kind and scale of the violence(s) that took place in parts of the 23 de enero. For instance, bullet holes reveal patterns of gunfire that, while generally grouped in the top three floors, are scattered even beyond the range of the photo. As such, the image speaks not only about violence but about a very particular form of violence that is indiscriminate and generalized, which was a fact lost on few. Said one resident, “What I can’t understand is why they took it out on the whole Block. The police know very well who those people [doing the shooting] are, where they live and what they do, because they usually commit their crimes in the community.”\textsuperscript{34}

And while the photo helps to capture the general tenor of violence that beset residents of Block 22-23, this testimony also complicates the overarching narrative captured in the photo. Indeed the image offers a vision and version of events that contributes to a memorialization which, over time, eliminated the possibility that engagements between area residents and state agents could have transpired. In short, the image is evidence of a massacre: indiscriminate, generalized, and without resistance. Yet testimonies stressing that area residents, who were well known to both police and neighbors, in fact engaged security forces subvert this narrative. Even years later

\textsuperscript{33} Araujo, “23 De Enero: Vivir Entre Balas.”

\textsuperscript{34} Equipo de Redacción, “23 De Enero: Francotiradores O Víctimas?,” Revista SIC 52, no. 513 (1989).
observers like Emilia could not dismiss the possibility of confrontation, noting that “those people were very combative.” These words do not justify the military’s response but acknowledge what, in her view, transpired. But these counter narratives only partially draw on a sense of historical accuracy. Built on a broader sense of local history, these statements acknowledge and even foreground that confrontations between the military and area residents did take place. Indeed, to deny the possibility of engagement with the military would have been to deny the history of struggle that made the 23 de enero a symbol of Venezuelans’ spirit of mobilization. Likewise, framing a confrontation between stones and bullets as unjust does not signal victimization when read against the backdrop of local histories of conflict in the 23 de enero. To the contrary, it lays bare the possibility and parameters of a fair engagement, something implicitly understood by area residents. In this sense, Emilia’s testimony, much like the testimony of residents of Block 22-23, emphasizes acceptable levels of violence and repression. These residents presented the scale of the violence as the breakdown of historical patterns of acceptability that were rooted in their lived experience as residents of the 23 de enero.

The photo of Block 22-23 also serves to disaggregate the experiences of residents of the 23 de enero. By providing a register of violence that became emblematic of the repression suffered both by a community and a nation as a whole at the hands of its own government, the image invites comparisons with other buildings in the 23 de enero, most of which emerged largely unscathed. Indeed when asked to speak of her experience during that week in Block 31, just down the street from Block 22-23, Emilia demurs, noting “it was not so bad [no fue tan fuerte].” Her testimony is rendered plausible by her
manifold experiences with, and recollections of, conflict in her own building. We can juxtapose in this same way the experiences of Juan Contreras and William Rangel that opened this chapter. Whereas the former’s recollections of returning to La Cañada on the evening of 27 February speak of looting and burned vehicles, the latter recalls returning to a Monte Piedad, just above La Cañada, steeped in tense calm. Making sense of these differences and the ways in which residents came to understand the state’s various responses requires understanding local and personal histories of conflict and consensus with the state. Residents used this same register to make sense of what transpired as a massacre less of people than of expectations. Accordingly, decoding one image of one Caracazo, as experienced in Block 22-23, helps to illustrate the interplay between specificity and generality that animates collective memories of the week of 27 February 1989 among residents of the 23 de enero. These multiple, simultaneous, and even contradictory Caracazos render both necessary and plausible a more precise narrative of the events.

**Histories and Geographies of Violence in the Caracazos of the 23 de enero**

On the morning of 27 February 1989 Manuel Mir was at work at the jefatura civil in the Mirador sector of the 23 de enero when he began to receive news of the protests unfolding in Guarenas, and later Caracas. Mir had interned, staffed, and worked at the jefatura civil, the neighborhood’s seat of administrative power, since the early 1980s. Still in college at the time, he had been inspired by Luis Herrera Campins’s message of democratic revolution to become involved with local affairs at the 23 de enero, eventually landing a position as aide to Herrera Campins’s personally selected appointee.
for jefe civil, Josefina Delgado. His experience working with Delgado, whose tenure was marked by outreach and collaboration with far ranging local groups and activists during protests like the secuestros, had imbued Manuel with a sense that anyone hoping to administer the 23 de enero required calm under pressure. So it came as a surprise when around 3 PM on 27 February, “desperate because they put up barricades in the rotary of Block 37 [Zona F],” the then-jefa civil Teresita de Cortes “abandoned” her post and fled the neighborhood.\textsuperscript{35} To be sure that Cortes, who was not a resident of the 23 de enero, had only taken up the jefatura three weeks earlier and was therefore unfamiliar with the tenor of contentiousness that marked local mobilization patterns likely contributed to her decision. But it left the neighborhood with no local authority and, in the jefe civil’s role as liaison with the Metropolitan Police contingent in the area, with no one to help coordinate and mediate between civilian and police factions.

With Cortes gone, Manuel hitched a ride back to his home in the Mirador sector of the Barrio Observatorio, overlooking Block 47-48-49 of Mirador next to the jefatura civil. Manuel’s parents had been among those who settled in ranchos around the superblocks in the days after Pérez Jiménez’s overthrow, and like most such once-squatter communities, the Barrio Mirador had long since become integrated into the local infrastructure. Once there, Manuel saw the first signs of looting. “Some acquaintances came with a truck full of all manner of things, and what they gave me was a bottle of rum, which of course I took.” They had found their wares in the nearby La Silsa area,

\textsuperscript{35} Mir.
suggesting that the looting was limited to neighboring areas rather than within the 23 de enero itself. But around 6 PM Manuel returned to Block 47-48-49 and found that “all the grocery stores in Mirador were looted.” These included the burned stand of a resident of the same Block, indicating that community membership had not protected area businesses from becoming targets of the early popular upheaval, and that in the Mirador sector of the 23 de enero, opportunity had directed the first actions of looting.

Witnessing the dramatic escalation of events in a span of three hours prompted Manuel and several others to walk to other sectors of the neighborhood in order to “feel reality [palpar la realidad].” Together they walked to Block 7, taking the route from Mirador, through Sierra Maestra, and finally to the Block 7 rotary linking La Cañada and Monte Piedad. Along the way they passed through makeshift barricades of burning tires in the Block 37 rotary, but what he most recalled was how “many walking around were armed, in other words, this around here was very tough [esto aquí fue muy fuerte].”

Lisandro Pérez of the Barrio La Redoma, just above the Block 37 rotary, was among those who had armed themselves, as he remembered, “preparing for combat.” His action and language had roots in a radical politics with which he had become engaged as a teen in the late 1970s and early 1980s, eventually becoming a cadre in underground political groups like Bandera Roja (Red Flag), and organizing cells in the 23 de enero and other popular sectors of Caracas. Yet in the early 1980s under the tutelage of 1960s urban guerrilla veteran Paquita Giuliani, Lisandro had also learned to integrate his radical

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36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
politics with community-oriented direct action. Indeed in the fray of the secuestros in January 1982 Paquita, Lisandro and two other youth had approached newspapers to denounce problems in the Mirador and Zona F sectors of the 23 de enero, a first for someone otherwise committed to armed struggle.\footnote{Perez.}

On the morning of 27 February Lisandro was at work delivering notices throughout the city for an accounting firm. By the time he arrived in La Redoma around 5 PM, he had already seen the looting unfolding in several parts of Caracas, and on Avenida Sucre in particular. In La Redoma itself members of Lisandro’s activist core had set up the barricades in the rotary of Block 37 that had promoted Cortes to flee the neighborhood. One of them greeted Lisandro while wearing a bullet proof vest: “The moment has come, the moment that had to happen,” he said. Lisandro, however, saw it differently. Indeed as he recalls, when neighbors conferred with him about what actions to take, Lisandro froze: “I was still dumbfounded [atontado] by the events.” Eventually, they organized to go to nearby Catia to loot stores, at first for groceries and later for home appliances. In his political training Lisandro had come to see activities like bank robberies and theft as legitimate forms of “expropriation,” but when asked if he considered the looting of stores in Catia that evening part of the framework of legitimate “expropriations,” Lisandro stated firmly: “No. That was a popular looting [saqueo popular].”\footnote{Ibid.}
Lisandro’s testimony helps set in relief how once radical activists in this part of the neighborhood were surprised by the sudden popular upheaval – a key point since claims about the role of these sectors in planning and staging the Caracazo would later emerge as an explanation for the intensity of repression that followed. But while they had no forewarning, people like Lisandro also quickly adapted to the evolving panorama, after recognizing, especially after setting out on that first night of looting, what Lisandro referred to as a sense that “everything had changed.” Indeed, that they drew upon their tactical repertoire to partake in the looting was meant less to direct than to assist in the aspirations of their neighbors. On that first day, activists in Barrio La Redoma provided both organization and defense, but did not take for granted what experience had taught them would likely emerge as a consequence. Indeed, they well expected “combat” and framed their actions – like staging barricades – in anticipation of confrontations with police, which actually did not materialize in La Redoma, on the evening of 27 February. Instead, by the time Lisandro returned from Catia around 5 AM on 28 February, “there were some engagements [conatos], but there was more order,” so much so that Lisandro and a friend instead left the 23 de enero to see how events were unfolding elsewhere.40

In Monte Piedad – ground zero for the secuestros of 1981-1982 – once-radical activists in the area put their organizing skills to other uses on 27 February. Andrés Vasquez had been among the first residents of Block 1, moving as a young child with his parents to the neighborhood while Pérez Jiménez was in power. Over the years Andrés

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40 Ibid.
had developed into a self-described ñangara, widely known in Monte Piedad for his activism with the Communist Party while it was illegal in the 1960s. In the 1970s, disenchanted with the electoral route the party had taken, he worked clandestinely with more left wing sectors like the Liga Socialista. In the 1980s, Andrés was among those who drew on a tactical repertoire forged around radical political activism to combat local criminals. He recalls, perhaps self-servingly, that “when people around here wanted to deal with a malandro [petty thief] they wouldn’t call the police, they would call us!” But on 27 February Andrés and another activist from Monte Piedad watched as their fellow residents attempted to break into the bodega on the first floor of Block 2, whose owner “always sold at high prices.” As Andrés recalls the incident, the pair at first attempted to intercede with their neighbors: “I told them, look brother, you are looting this and it is going to harm us … shit, just leave this as is.” Apparently unmoved neighbors continued in their attempt to loot the store, leading to escalation: “We stood there, with pistols in our hands and in the store in Block 2, ‘You are not going to loot these stores [in Monte Piedad], no, you will not loot them.’ And we didn’t let them.”

This incident in Monte Piedad alerts us to the multiple layers of internal friction unleashed as patterns of the possible began to collapse on 27 February. That neighbors would target a local store in part because he “sold at high prices” spoke less about the opportunity of proximity and more about underlying grievances among neighbors. At the same time, the incident also reveals that, in the face of these events, otherwise politically

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41 Vásquez.
minded sectors turned towards pragmatism, echoing Lisandro’s experience in La Redoma. Indeed, looting a store nearby would mean having to go outside the neighborhood to find groceries, and in the long run, risk that the stores would not reopen. This was not an opportunity to create consciousness or engage in political critique. At the same time this brief stand-off among neighbors sheds light on local power dynamics in Monte Piedad in the prelude to 27 February. Indeed, that Andrés had attempted to impose authority on the basis of what he perceived as an argument about the pragmatics of short term gain versus medium and long term losses, only to be rebuffed, underscored the limits of his self-proclaimed role as a community enforcer. Residents only responded when he spoke with the weight of a weapon behind him, the realm within which his standing in the neighborhood had been cemented in the preceding years. They left the stores untouched on the basis of mutual understanding about what had been established as permissible in the area, even in a context of rapidly changing norms. In this context, then, it was unsurprising that when William Rangel returned to Monte Piedad on the evening of 27 February, he found “things were peaceful” because the peace was enforced on the basis of the same coercive tactics and that had brought them legitimacy in the years before 1989.

While local organizers laid down the law in Monte Piedad, in the adjoining La Cañada sector the night of 27 February held a much different experience. Juan Contreras had first sensed trouble as soon as he returned the sector around 7 PM, following his peripatetic trip from La Urbina in the eastern edges of Caracas. After running past looted and burned out stores in Avenida Sucre, Juan and three others made their way over the
Agua Salud Metro station and arrived in front of Block 15 of La Cañada. “When we end up here … we see a trash truck burned, a bus burned, the streets blocked and so forth, and the people looting businesses.” For Juan these were far from uncommon sights. Indeed during the 1970s, still in his teens, Juan had become active in the politics – and armed tactics – of radical left groups with a strong underground presence in the 23 de enero, in particular Bandera Roja in its Marxist Leninist wing. As a young, self-described “extremist” Juan had participated in many of the confrontations typical for activist youth of the day: scuffles with police, student barricades, an occasional shootout. Early in the decade, he had helped stage an armed assault against a newly opened Metropolitan Police substation located just below Block 19, where Juan’s family had lived since 1962. And yet by the mid 1980s, Juan had undergone a similar evolution as other one-time radicals in the neighborhood, slowly incorporating a language and practice of community work into a repertoire of direct action that would see him participate in the secuestros, and eventually land him in the presidency of the local neighbors’ association, a dramatic shift for a once self-described “abstentionist.”

In this context, what made the scenes unfolding stand apart for Contreras was the looting, but in particular, its composition. Indeed years later, his recollections of those early moments in the Caracazo of La Cañada still lay bare a struggle to reconcile his contentious past in the neighborhood with what he was witnessing below: “We were

42 Contreras.

43 Jose Manuel Perez, “Comando Guerrillero Ataco Modulo Policial De La Cañada En El 23 De Enero Con Tiros Y Bombas,” Ultimas Noticias, 15 October 1983.

44 Contreras.
standing on the fourth floor [of Block 19] … ‘but look, the same people who are always criticizing us are the people who are looting, there’s so and so, and look.’ And we were the ones who ended up as the troublemakers [revoltosos].” From his apartment in Block 19 he watched as his neighbors sacked the corner store in Block 20 sacked. But “instead of getting involved … we stayed put.”

Yet as night progressed, standing by as spectators became more and more untenable for Juan and his fellow activists, especially after the first signs of a state response emerged. Indeed as the looting transpired in Block 20, according to Juan a police jeep sped by and “let off a few rounds.” Though brief, this encounter portended a rapid escalation of an already explosive situation in La Cañada. Indeed their eventual appearance between 7 and 8 PM, several hours after barricades had emerged in the Block 37 rotary, and after stores in Mirador had been burned and looted, reflected what journalist Fabricio Ojeda identified as the moment in “the high afternoon [when] apparently the Metropolitan Police received instructions to repress with force.”

Here, understanding the Metropolitan Police strike that preceded 27 February 1989 proves critical. Two major grievances motivated subaltern sectors of the PM, one demanding higher wages and benefits, the other demanding changes in the institutional structure of the force. The non-resolution of the first grievance resulted in the active participation of some police personnel in the looting that took place on 27 and 28

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45 Ibid.


47 Ruben Dario Albornoz, "Llegó La Hora En Que La Pm Debe Ser Conducida Por Sus Directores Naturales," El Mundo, 16 February 1989.
February. But the second grievance held more significant implications for understanding the rapid escalation of repression. Indeed, since its founding in 1969 the PM had been a two-tiered institution: while its rank and file was comprised of officers specifically trained to work with civilians, its leadership drew from the National Guard. As such two conflicting cultural ethoses coexisted in the institution, one based on a civilian code of conduct, the other based on military training. Two weeks before 27 February 1989, middle class neighborhood associations had expressed their solidarity with police subalterns’ grievances, especially their institutional dimensions, by pointing out the operational differences between a civilian based police force and one based on military codes: “the criteria of the National Guard are ‘lightning operations’ [operativos relámpago], and therein lies the repression and effect-seeking.” On 18 February, following a high level meeting between President Pérez, the Minister of the Interior, and the Minister of Defense, the government announced a “general review” of the nation’s police forces in the interest of having “all members of the police be careful in their actions, very even and not commit any type of excesses.” As part of this review, the government announced that some career officers would indeed be promoted to command

48 Coronil and Skurski, "Dismembering and Remembering the Nation," 315.


roles, with the first two taking their positions on 23 February, just four days before the
Caracazo.\textsuperscript{51}

Juan’s account supports this analysis of the rapid escalation of events in La
Cañada, which highlights a type of confrontation marked by immediate – though as yet
not direct – use of weapons against civilians in the context of general upheaval, well
exceeding what President Pérez himself would later describe as the major difference
between police and military personnel: “The police officer is the one who goes in with
persuasion and only at the last minute takes out his weapon to defend himself.”\textsuperscript{52} But for
Juan, the police’s delay also reflected a larger reality about the way in which the
Caracazos in the 23 de enero were unfolding. “We said, well, things must be so bad’
elsewhere in Caracas, as in fact his earlier cross-city travel had laid bare, that by
comparison what was taking place in the 23 de enero seemed far less pressing to a police
force already stretched thin, and already well acquainted with the potential response of
organized sectors of the population.\textsuperscript{53}

This point is central. Indeed in La Cañada police delay proved crucial for two
main reasons. The first was the way in which it forced a rapid amplification of rules of
engagement for police. Authorized to “repress with force,” police transitioned from
absence to live fire with little gradual escalation. The second was how it allowed local
activists like Juan to process, and begin to prepare, a response to what their own histories

\textsuperscript{51} Humberto Alvarez, “Oficiales De La Pm Sustituyen En Mando a 2 Coroneles De Gn,” \textit{El Nacional}, 24
February 1989.

\textsuperscript{52} President Pérez offered this statement to press on 10 June 1990. \textit{Demanda Ante La Corte Interamericana
De Derechos Humanos}, 8.

\textsuperscript{53} Contreras.
with armed conflict in the neighborhood suggested was to unfold. Indeed, as Juan recalls, “At night when the police was going to come in here we said: well, let’s pick up all the bottles we can, let’s take from the store all those bottles, all those crates. And that’s what we did. We started bringing up bottles, crates and crates.” Yet Juan clarifies, “we did not get involved in any looting … we saw looting as almost ugly. I mean, how can it be, where are we going to buy things tomorrow? But you have to remember, the masses overflowed all of that, so we decided well, we have to prepare, because the repression is coming, huge.”

Juan’s interpretation of seizing property as preparation for anticipated engagement with police helps to highlight how the interregnum between the first popular actions and the first police actions on one hand allowed local activists to structure responses by drawing on repertoires of action anchored in local histories of violent activism. On the other hand, it also again showcases how to understand their eventual participation in activities they otherwise dismissed as apolitical – like looting – they seasoned political activists well steeped in the traditions of violent conflict in three different areas of the 23 de enero – Lisandro in Mirador, Andrés in Monte Piedad, and Juan in La Cañada – had to resort to new structuring mechanisms, namely pragmatism.

It was against this backdrop in La Cañada that the first armed confrontations in the 23 de enero took place, on the night of 27 February. Manuel Mir, still conducting rounds and, as member of the civilian authority of the neighborhood in the absence of Cortes, receiving periodic reports from the Metropolitan Police contingent in the area about the situation in the neighborhood, recalls how police tried to regroup at the module

54 Ibid.
in La Cañada on the evening of 27 February to organize a response to the looting, including raiding apartments in search of stolen goods. As they did so, residents of the neighboring Blocks 18 and 19 began to “throw molotovs . . . and a series of things. They were prisoners, many of the police personnel could not get out.”

From the twelfth floor of Block 19 where Juan and several others had taken with whatever bottles they had been able to recover from the store in Block 20, they were able to watch “all the police movement” movement: “The police arrived, the jaulas [literally, cages; police detention vehicles] arrived, shooting and so forth, and there was a strong attack [arremetida] by the police. There was also a strong attack, guns blazing [a tiro limpio], from the buildings toward the police, and the company captain goes down, dead. He falls dead, the police retreats, it was impossible for them to enter the Block, and from all over people yelled at them, from everywhere there are shots, and he falls dead.”

According to Manuel, at the time coordinating with police, the captain had “gone to the rescue” of his men in the module, by Manuel’s account trapped, when he “perished.”

Eduardo Meza Istúriz, 34 years old and a father of two, became the first casualty of the Caracazo in the 23 de enero. His death certificate recorded a “gunshot to the torax” as the cause of death. From above in Block 19, Juan remembers the moment Istúriz was hit: “we saw that they were dragging him and right around then they took him

55 Mir.
56 Contreras.
57 Mir.
away.” But it was not until the following morning Juan discovered Istúriz had died, not from press accounts which did not report it until 1 March, but from neighbors who warned Juan and his friends to “get out of here, go on get out … what’s coming will be tough [esto va a venir fuerte].” But for Juan, the episode was embedded in much broader context of fast changing boundaries of the possible, an interregnum between what had been and what was to be. Reflecting on the warnings from neighbors directed at him and his friends, Juan notes: “we had gone out, doing the rounds, watching everything that was happening, [so] we said, how can it be, it will have to be a massive repression, they will have to arrest everybody, and in our case we weren’t involved with the looting.”

Istúriz’s death marked the most dramatic in a series of early events that lay bare, in the words of Lisandro, how “everything had changed.” Placed in the context of recent history, at first glance little seemed novel about a group of area residents violently engaging police in the 23 de enero. Yet even at the height of battles between police and area youth in the 1970s, no officers had died in those confrontations. Juan’s own reflection of what transpired that evening well suggested that in the fray of attempting to make sense of Istúriz’s death, local militants nevertheless struggled to draw upon past experience, coming up empty. Indeed, in the context of generalized violation of the law, generalized repression of the same scale seemed implausible. At the same time, selective repression seemed futile. In this space between knowing that a response was to follow, but being unable to imagine its scale, militants like Juan hoped to render otherwise

60 Jose Luis Rivas, “Plomo Cerrado Esta Mañana En El 23 De Enero,” El Mundo, 1 March 1989.
61 Contreras.
unrecognizable events in terms that they could historically locate within a lived experience of engagement with police. But in the fray of what in fact was a situation of chaos, these attempts proved useless. History and hysteria clashed, and the former lost. As Manuel, reflecting on the events of La Cañada on the evening of 27 February 1989, summarized: “It was very rough here in the neighborhood, here, we had it tense, the people.”

In particular, the tension revolved around expectations of what would follow after a night when, in La Cañada as elsewhere in the 23 de enero, expectations had lost referents. Indeed, as Tuesday 28 February dawned on the 23 de enero, the previous day and nights’ events seemed to hold few clues about what would transpire in the hours ahead. In Monte Piedad, the same sectors that had on 27 February prevented their neighbors from sacking local stores helped to organize lootings elsewhere in a bid to respond to local pressure. William recalls that on 28 February, “A group of us stayed here, protecting the stores, and another group went out to loot.” Andrés, who on the previous evening had helped prevent the sacking of a local store by a crowd of his neighbors, was among those heading to nearby San Bernardino the next day, including some of the very neighbors he had warded off earlier:

We were there, I was in the Barrio Los Erazos, then I saw a bunch of people, there was a Central Madeirense [supermarket] and I started the looting. In that multitude all that’s needed is for someone to say something. So we were in the Central Madeirense and there, I didn’t know if I did right or wrong, but I started [chanting]: ‘the people are hungry, the people are hungry!’ And there, when they came, they went into that Central.

62 Mir.

63 Rangel.
Andrés’s testimony sheds light on the continuing confusion gripping Caracas 24 hours after the first protests began, as well as underlying motivations informing people’s decision to partake in the events. Yet it also reveals the tenuousness of organization in a context of flux. For instance still in the supermarket, Andrés recalls how “the most wily [los más vivos], instead of going into the Central Madeirense went into Super Volúmen [electronics store] which was next door and brought back everything, everything.”

Then a 25 year old Army lieutenant, Jesús Manuel Zambrano received orders on the afternoon of 28 February to take a contingent of troops to the same area in San Bernardino. “The order was ‘go and neutralize that looting, how you do it is not my problem, but neutralize it.’” Where another lieutenant on scene fired a round into the air, Zambrano pursued a different avenue: “We organized the looting,” distinguishing between need and opportunity. “We organized it because they were taking things like the cash registers, which really didn’t correspond to their needs. ‘If you really rose up because there are problems, needs and you want to take the food, then go ahead and take it: form a line one-by-one for meat; a soldier over there to control things. And the people went in, took, and carted off their things.’”

The Army’s presence in San Bernardino responded to their deployment late the previous evening, following an executive order issued to Minister of Defense Alliegri by President Pérez at 11 PM on 27 February after he returned to Caracas from Barquisimeto.

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64 Vásquez.

to see the streets near the Presidential Palace strewn with debris. According to Alliegri, the Army’s mission was to “restore the legal order which has been subverted,” although one eyewitness recalled that Pérez, on issuing the order, had second thoughts after speaking to Gonzalo Barrios, one of the founders of AD: “when the Army goes out into the streets,” warned Barrios, “it’s to kill people.” In the space between restablishing order and mass repression lay the Plan Avila. Designed in the 1960s, the plan contemplated a scenario whereby urban guerrillas overwhelmed local police and National Guard, requiring the deployment of regular Army obeying a battle plan with a loose command structure. Unencumbered by rigid chains of command, acting as cells with wide ranging operational discretion, individual units would be able to mobilize quickly and effectively in response to equally nimble guerrilla forces. As General Manuel Antonio Heinz Azpurua, commander of the Caracas garrison and of the capital Strategic Command during February and March 1989, later conveyed to a investigating tribunal in 1996: “the executioners of the Plan [Avila] are all of us.”

Zambrano’s testimony above tends to support this interpretation of the tactical range of the Plan Avila, giving field officers broad discretion to “restore the legal order” within their prescribed theater of operations. The broader implications, of course, related to the effects of this kind of tactical discretion in a situation of mass public unrest. As


67 Betancourt, "El Caracazo."

68 Corte Suprema de Justicia República de Venezuela, Sala Político-Administrativa, in Box: Caso del Caracazo (Aguilera la Rosa) Original, Documentos Presentados por la Republica de Venezuela el 10 de noviembre de 1999, en la Audiencia Publica de Fondo, Escrito de COFAVIC Ref/Poder, Fotografías de los sucesos (San José: Corte Inter American de Derechos Humanos, 1999), 30.
Francisco Espinoza Guyón, a lieutenant during the Caracazo, recalled to Marta Harnecker in 2003:

No one gave me a direct order to shoot to kill, but they did tell us that constitutional rights were suspended and that, if we needed to use our weapons to repress a looting, we were authorized to do so because nothing was going to happen to us. In other words, maybe they didn’t explicitly order us to kill, but they did insinuate that if we needed to use it was within the rules of engagement to do so.69

In fact, at noon on 28 February, President Pérez and his full cabinet signed Decree no. 49, suspending freedoms of speech and assembly as well as habeas corpus, in addition to declaring an indefinite curfew to begin at 6 PM and last until 6 AM.

Taken together, the deployment of troops following Plan Avila, the suspension of constitutional rights, and the imposition of a twelve hour curfew marked a confluence of proscriptive measures never before seen in Venezuela’s democratic history, especially when aimed at suppressing what even President Pérez recognized was an expression of popular discontent, not an “anti-governmental action.”70 Even the nominal precedent for regimes of exception in democratic Venezuela – the early 1960s period of guerrilla war – had been aimed at combating political movements seeking state power, and never revised accordingly. As Minister Alliegro pointed out to a congressional commission, Plan Avila had been “in place since the 1960s … [and] was carried out despite a long period without putting it into practice.”71

69 Harnecker, Militares Junto Al Pueblo, 172.


In the main, the practical effect of drawing on an unrevised military plan aimed at combating political subversives was two fold. The first was to focus the bulk of military presence on areas deemed a strategic threat in the context of a threat to the government, whether or not they represented an immediate center of the public unrest actually gripping Caracas. In this sense, as a focal point of the 1960s era guerrilla insurgency, coupled with its strategic location overlooking the Presidential Palace, the 23 de enero was one of three areas to which the Army deployed. The second was to draw upon a logic, and language, of insurrection that, much as was the case for militants in the 23 de enero, prompted military personnel to view events through the prism of a history long since past. For instance where some in government saw “gatillos alegres” (literally happy triggers; random shooters) firing from buildings in the 23 de enero, among the military far more menacing “sharpshooters” emerged as the enemy.

More than semantics separated the two. In the early afternoon of Tuesday 28 February, a contingent of Army troops arrived in the same La Silsa sector of Caracas where Manuel Mir’s neighbors from Barrio Observatorio had taken to loot the day before. Using a local factory as a staging area, the troops prepared to deploy to the 23 de enero, in particular the Atlántico Norte sector in the western edge of the neighborhood. Justa above, in Block 1 of Atlántico Norte, Moncada, his wife Alicia, her deaf sister Milvia, and two neighbors took in the troop movement below, while Moncada’s children

72 The other two areas were El Valle, located next to the Caracas barracks and at the western entrance to Caracas, and Petare, located in the Eastern entrance to Caracas connecting the capital to Guarenas and Guatire, where the protests had begun. Roberto Giusti, “Comandante Galué García: A Merced De Los Insurrectos,” in Cuando La Muerte Tomó Las Calles (Caracas: El Nacional, 1989), 24.

73 Betancourt, “El Caracazo.”
– twelve year old Katiuska and eight year old Francisco – played in the apartment.

According to testimony subsequently submitted to the Inter American Court of Human Rights, at around 4 PM Moncada was jolted out of a shower by his wife’s screams.

While he was in the bathroom, Moncada’s son Francisco and his sister-in-law Milvia had peered out the terrace when the troops below opened fire, after allegedly alerting them to step back.74 A bullet grazed Milvia in the neck. Young Francisco fared far worse. 

Another bullet shattered his frontal lobe, rendering him blind and unable to speak.75 Over the next three hours as his son bled out, Moncada raced to various hospitals seeking help, only to be rejected in the first two due to the same lack of resources that had led city health care workers to contemplate a strike the week before. “He couldn’t talk or see after they shot him,” testified Moncada, “but he could hear me… I asked him questions and he squeezed my hand, he squeezed my hand to tell me that it hurt. And so on until I left him [at the Lídice hospital], later they notified me he was dead.”76

As eight year old Francisco fell mortally wounded in Atlántico Norte, on the other side of the 23 de enero the Army’s deployment would serve a different purpose, nevertheless resulting in similar bloodshed. In La Cañada, troops had taken positions outside the Agua Salud Metro station in front of Block 15, where on the previous night residents had set a bus on fire. However several hundred yards away, between Blocks


76 “Testimonio Del Sr. Francisco Moncada,” in Caso no. 11.455, Aguilera la Rosa y otros, Video testimonial presentado, por los representantes de COFAVIC (Washington: Comision Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, 1997).
18 and 19, the engagements between local militants and Metropolitan Police that had left captain Istúriz dead the previous night continued though with less intensity, limited primarily to the stoning of the La Cañada police module by residents in Barrio Sucre. Yet emboldened by the Army’s presence, police responded with force. Late in the afternoon 29 year old Carlos Antonio Dorantes Torres, then in his first semester at the Universidad Central de Venezuela, was among those stoning the module when police opened fire, shooting Carlos in the chest.\textsuperscript{77} His death certificate indicated that Dorantes died from “internal hemorrhaging following a gunshot wound to the torax.”\textsuperscript{78}

The successive deaths of Francisco Moncada and Carlos Dorantes on the afternoon of 28 February heralded the manner and scale of violence that would grip the neighborhood in the ensuing days. That they took place on opposite ends of the 23\textsuperscript{de}enero suggested a comprehensive response that would not discriminate against specific areas of the neighborhood. Francisco’s death in Atlántico Norte shed light on the kind of “indiscriminate firing by agents of the Venezuelan state” that the Inter American Court of Human Rights would later identify caused most deaths.\textsuperscript{79} Meanwhile, the police’s response to rock throwing in La Cañada, coming as it did at the heels of the death of one of their own the night before, indicated a far more determined and aggressive approach than had marked their earlier actions. Undergirding both responses was the Plan Avila in both its tactical and strategic dimensions, the former providing security forces with the

\textsuperscript{77} Contreras.


\textsuperscript{79} \textit{Caso Del Caracazo}, 5.
necessary latitude to deploy force arbitrarily, while the latter helping to reconfigure all residents as potential threats to the state. In this sense, the deaths of Moncada and Dorantes marked a watershed as the the eyes of the state subsumed into a single entity the multiplicity of Caracazos that had developed in the neighborhood the night before.

Testimonies of the evening of 28 February bore out this dynamic. María Betilde Hernández, for 31 years a resident of Block 25 of the Zona Central, reported how she had planned a birthday party for her granddaughter that night, but the fast worsening situation had led her to cancel the event.\footnote{Serrano, "'Muchos Francotiradores Pertenecen Al Hampa Común'," 20.} As afternoon turned to night and the curfew set in, “gunfire erupted [empezó la plomazón] … after the first shots I jumped on the floor, grabbed my six children and we crawled to our neighbor’s apartment after spending several hours in the bathroom.” During that time, she recalled, “they fired at twenty minute intervals for half an hour [each time].” Then troops raided her apartment: “The military came up and with such cruelty [con tantas sañas] burst in shooting, managing to make a piñata of Donald Duck bleed out its candy and toys. They confused the duck with a sharpshooter.” In the process they had also managed to wound Hernández’s daughter, and to destroy her apartment.\footnote{Araujo, "23 De Enero: Vivir Entre Balas," 83.} Illustrating the tactical problems facing a military operating under loose rules of engagement in a context of high tension, Maria later told reporters, “Thank goodness that after a while a lieutenant came up and when he saw the destruction he was amazed of what his troops had done. After that they left.”\footnote{Serrano, "'Muchos Francotiradores Pertenecen Al Hampa Común'," 21.}
And while her family had found shelter at the home of a neighbor who had barricaded his
apartment, the shooting continued all through the night and into the following dawn. One
newspaper’s headline summarized the violence: “Pure lead [Plomo cerrado] this morning
in the 23 de enero.”

The night of 28 February also brought a different modality of repression. Around
midnight police began to raid the apartments of known militants in La Cañada, among
them Juan Contreras in Block 19. Police had identified Juan as a possible leader in what
they referred to as “this mess,” immediately transferring him to the DISIP, Venezuela’s
secret service responsible for investigating political threats to the state. In fact as Juan
recalls, “that was a line full of yellow patrol cars [DISIP] from Block 20 all the way to
Block 7.” For the next ten days, as they unsuccessfully sought evidence pointing to his
culpability in the assassination of captain Istúriz, DISIP officials held Juan
incommunicado at their headquarters, alongside dozens of other suspected militants from
all over Caracas. Searching for and detaining militants had also formed part of the
military’s actions in Zona Central. As they burst through her apartment door, Noraima
Hernández reported how officers “showed her a list, threatening me and pointing out an
ambulance that was downstairs telling me ‘you see vieja, that’s where we’re going to put
the dead, all dead, if you don’t help us.” Against the backdrop of the military’s presence
in the Zona Central and the Metropolitan Police’s counteroffensive in La Cañada, Juan’s

83 Rivas, "Plomo Cerrado Esta Mañana En El 23 De Enero."
84 Contreras.
85 Araujo, "23 De Enero: Vivir Entre Balas," 83.
experience with the DISIP set in relief the close inter-institutional collaboration among the state’s security apparatus in the 23 de enero by 28 February.

Yet the night’s events were but a prelude for what transpired over the next 24 hours. As Lisandro Pérez recalls, “the third day was the toughest.” In particular for this long time militant, the day was framed in the context of direct engagement with the Army after what they had come to view as a disproportionate state action in the neighborhood requiring a response from armed and organized sectors. During the day, groups of militants took up positions in the “showcase” blocks facing Avenida Sucre, activating networks of underground cells to communicate and provide resources for what they well acknowledged was a disparate engagement requiring new tactics. Indeed, asked how they prepared to confront a military opponent, Lisandro replied, “it meant we had to adjust, we had to be much more cautious in our approach,” meaning in particular the disciplined use of limited firepower and ammunition. “We had pistols; they had FALs, 50 caliber machine guns, tanks.”

Lisandro’s testimony helps to illustrate how area militants had come to interpret the state’s actions in the neighborhood as a political act requiring a political response in the realm of armed confrontation. In this sense, the state’s response to an imagined political threat had helped call that threat into being in the 23 de enero.

By the afternoon of 1 March clashes between militants and state agents had begun to yield casualties, turning parts of the neighborhood into a battlefield. In particular, the area between La Cañada and Zona Central emerged as a “no man’s land” where military

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86 Perez.
posted in front of the Agua Saludo metro station (see Figure 18) exchanged gunfire with Block 22-23. A recent migrant to Caracas from the western state of Zulia, twenty year old Alirio José Cañizales fell dead from a gunshot wound as he left the Agua Saludo metro station on his way to his cousin’s home in the Zona Central. As the shooting continued, Alirio’s blood soaked body remained on the street overnight before friends and relatives could claim it the following morning (see Figure 20). The drama of Alirio’s body strewn for hours in public view as gunfire raged caught journalist Régulo Párraga by surprise. Then living in Block 22-23, Párraga recounted in the press what he termed his “night of terror” between 1 and 2 March, highlighting the experience of dodging bullets coming from both the buildings above and the troops below, and racing past the body of whom was likely Alirio Cañizáles. In the early hours of curfew, according to Párraga, the clashes that had gripped the area in the afternoon seemed to abate, although by 9 PM they resumed as chants like “The people united will never be defeated [El pueblo unido jamás sera vencido]” and “People, listen, join the struggle [Pueblo, escucha, únete a la lucha]” began to echo.

Over the next seven hours three waves of gunfire, the most intense at midnight, terrorized residents of the Block. Lending credence to the levels of organization by militants that Lisandro’s testimony had already prefigured, Párraga noted how “two times the military [intensified] their attack and in tremendous moments [sendas ocasiones] the opposing side [held] their positions firmly.” Meanwhile military personnel struggled

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88 Araujo, "23 De Enero: Vivir Entre Balas,” 83.
keep apace with militants “because they are constantly moving, they go from one floor to the next through the trash chutes.” For Army officers planning operations in the area they had codenamed “Zulu,” militants’ mobility presented problems both tactical and strategic. “It’s not a matter of firepower,” one officer on the scene later told reporters. “We don’t want to massify our actions, we are trying to obtain information to specify in which building and in which apartment they are [located].” But only in part. “We are also facing a dilemma: there are soldiers who live in critical sectors, who might have to fire upon the same Block where their own family lives.”

Yet the fighting continued until 4 AM, when “only sporadic shots [could] be heard, indicating that the worst of the battle [had] passed and the nearness of day heralded the end of hostilities.”

Still, Thursday morning dawned with evidence of the previous night’s battle scattered throughout the neighborhood’s streets. From the El Valle sector of Caracas, one of three major areas of military presence in the capital and where similar forms of violence had gripped residents the previous night, photographer Tomás Grillo made his way to the 23 de enero.

There he captured the scene as friends and family collected Alirio’s body. In another shot a different set of residents laid a sheet over an unidentified corpse that had also remained overnight in the parking lot behind Block 22-23 (see Figure 19). With some rhetorical flair nevertheless anchored in scenes unfolding throughout,
journalist Fabricio Ojeda wrote how “In the morning, following the second night of curfew, those who descended from the barrios to go to work tripped over bodies shot up during the hours of exception.”

While morning on March 2 brought a respite, it was short lived. By early afternoon the fighting that had characterized the previous day flared anew. Around 2 PM 54 year old José Calixto Blanco, a messenger for the Ministry of Justice, was shot in the face as he stepped out of the Agua Salud metro station. Subsequent investigations by the Inter American Commission on Human Rights determined that military personnel were responsible for his death. Blanco’s death, taking place well before curfew, exposed how a logic of war continued to grip armed forces deployed to the neighborhood, especially as they faced a very real adversary firing, as Párraga wryly put in his account of the previous day, “bullets that really kill [disparos que matan de verdad].” As Lisandro remembered the events from within the ranks of militants, “we were determined not to let them enter the Blocks.” And as reporters covering the continuing violence in the 23 de enero noted from interviews of area residents, militants were in fact proving successful in this objective. “There the Army still has not penetrated, there are groups who resist to lay down their weapons.” And yet their tactical

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94 *Demanda Ante La Corte Interamericana De Derechos Humanos*, 72.

95 Párraga, "Noche De Terror," 61.

96 Perez.
successes were proving strategically costly. “The agitators [revoltosos] don’t want to enter into reason at a time when all sectors of national life are asking for it.”

But for militants like Lisandro, the issue was less about when to lay down their weapons than how to confront the moment when their ammunition finally ran out. Indeed Lisandro’s earlier tactical assessment ahead of the first engagements had already acknowledged their position of weakness vis-à-vis an adversary they had never confronted: the Venezuelan military. Embedded in his testimony was a sense that fighting in this context was more a matter of political principle than of strategic success. Accordingly, for a second day on 2 March, militants in the Zona Central clashed with military personnel stationed below, resolving to continue their stand until their ammunition expired and in this sense playing into the strategy of attrition that military planners had settled into after the first clashes on Tuesday night, establishing “a defensive perimeter as a siege until the sharpshooters run out of rounds.” And in fact, that the continuing clashes took place so close to the Miraflores presidential palace presented the Pérez administration with more than a military problem. It also posed a public relations problem as the government sought to impose a narrative of normalcy that nevertheless ran against a contrasting narrative of ongoing skirmishes just outside. For instance on Thursday at noon Pérez boarded a helicopter – shadowed by an armored attack helicopter – to assess the situation in Caracas from above. After returning to Miraflores he declared “there’s normalcy in the city. I return very satisfied with the flyover I have made. All of

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98 Salcedo, "El Último Toque De Queda a Bordo De Un Convoy," 18.
the city, all the barrios are in complete normalcy … everything is normal.” Yet as
reporters noted, Pérez’s offered his views “Despite the fact that while he gave his
statements ceaseless gunfire in the 23 de enero could be heard.”

Still, Pérez’s assertions of normalcy found some expression in deed as he ordered a scaling back of the
curfew, from 5 AM to 8 PM.

Contending with ongoing clashes was not the only problem facing the Pérez
government as it tried to reassert control. On Friday 3 March, in his first remarks to
foreign correspondents since 27 February, Pérez offered initial assessments of the events
that had gripped Venezuela now for nearly a week. “There was no civil war here,” he
asserted. Neither had the protests been politically motivated, anti-government or anti
party. “One didn’t see a single party office looted or burned,” he noted. Instead, the
protest had been “against the rich,” a product of festering inequality coupled with the
sudden impact of higher gas and transportation costs. And while he did not dismiss the
possibility that 1960s era “revolutionary” groups had “as a result of these events
reactivated their actions,” for Pérez the underlying issue remained the structural problems
of an oil dependent economic system that had created an illusion of wealth only to find
that “we did not have the bases that an economy should have to face difficult
situations.”

For Pérez, explaining unprecendented mass protest in the context of
structural inequality helped to lend a seamless narrative to otherwise ineffable events.

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100 Rojas, "Pérez Descartó Guerra Civil Y Negó Que Sea Una Acción Antigubernamental."
But it failed to capture the reality of state efforts to reassert control that had been imagined, and deployed, precisely to deal with political threats against the state.

This reality continued to play out in the 23 de enero. Just hours after Pérez offered his statements to foreign correspondents, 43 year old Carlos H. Cuñar of Block 1 in Monte Piedad took advantage of the extended curfew hours to purchase groceries for his mother, also in Block 1, and to do maintenance work on his car. Around 3 PM, according to the testimony of Carlos’s mother, soldiers aboard an armored personnel carrier stationed nearby shot him three times. Gravely wounded, Carlos nevertheless managed to drive himself to an area hospital, where by 6 PM he died. Carlos’s death illustrated the extent to which the state’s response in then neighborhood had come to cast the 23 de enero writ large as a combat zone, its residents constituting legitimate targets in a context of continuing collective anxiety. Indeed, as reporters covering his death later noted, Carlos “had become popular in the Block for battling against the guerrillas in the 1960s; he was unconditional to the military and even chauffeured a General for years.” As an Army reservist, Carlos had also served overseas. In this sense, Carlos’s death underscored how in casting a wide repressive net while drawing on a tactical repertoire aimed at targeting insurgents, the Pérez government had subsumed difference in the 23 de enero and in the process alienated sectors otherwise disposed to support a robust military presence in the neighborhood. 101

Carlos’s death also exposed the ongoing violence in the 23 de enero despite claims to citywide “normalecty” by government officials. In fact as the evening’s curfew

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101 Araujo, "23 De Enero: Vivir Entre Balas," 82.
began at 8 PM on Friday 3 March, militants in the Zona Central mounted a last stand against Army troops below. As Lisandro recalled, “on Friday night we ran out of ammunition and retreated. Then we waited to be detained. But we had the satisfaction that [the military] never took the buildings.” In fact, not all stayed behind. William Rangel, who had partaken in armed engagements with military from Monte Piedad, took to Guarenas to evade the anticipated wave of retribution, which began on Saturday morning as troops set out to conduct house to house searches nominally to recover looted property, but additionally to seek out area militants suspected of battling military and police the week before.

Yet even in this context as the week ended and confrontations abated, residents of the 23 de enero remained under siege. In Block 45-46-47 of the Mirador sector, Rosario Rojas heard the gunshot that killed her 26 year old son José Alejandro López around 8 PM on Saturday 4 March. Ironically, Alejandro had spent the day at a local hospital at the bedside of a friend, shot on Thursday night. At that time Alejandro and several others had reportedly defied the curfew and orders of police to “leave him in the stairs because we’ll pick him up tomorrow” and instead took their injured friend to get medical care. But on returning from the hospital as curfew set in on Saturday, according to Rosario, police opened fire on Alejandro. His brother later told reporters, “The shot was to the back and sudden [a la espalda y en seco]. He died instantly.”

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103 Perez.


105 Redacción, "23 De Enero: Francotiradores O Víctimas?," 111.
turned to morning, 25 year old Enrique Napoleón Soto Vilera became the last accounted casualty of the Caracazos in the 23 de enero when a shot fired from the Naval Observatory on the hills above shattered his skull as he made his walked out of his home in the barrio sector of Sierra Maestra. The cause of death: “Cranial wound with loss of brain matter.”"106

Conclusion

Reflecting on her travels through Caracas on the night of Saturday 4 March, alongside an Army convoy during curfew, journalist Cristina Marcano Salcedo remarked: “The 23 de enero is not a many headed hydra, it has exactly 45 [sic] heads, the number of Blocks in the neighborhood.”107 Drawing on a reference illustrative both of monstrosity and of multiplicity, Marcano’s observation helps set in relief the ways in which the state viewed – and responded to – the 23 de enero in a climate devoid of precedents. What was threatening was a visualization of the 23 de enero as a multitude, many parts acting in concert but independently from one another, nevertheless linked by a common identity. Responding to this monstrous hydra required subsuming difference in the neighborhood, historical difference that in the earliest moments of the Caracazo manifested itself throughout the 23 de enero in multiple responses rooted in the individual trajectories of the neighborhood’s various areas. Instead, to attack the hydra meant to attack its constitutive parts simultaneously, to imagine the neighborhood as one.


107 Salcedo, "El Último Toque De Queda a Bordo De Un Convoy."
The testimony of AD partisans in the neighborhood well captures this process of subsuming difference, but more importantly, the effects of dispensing with history and difference in order to mount a collective response to an imagined wholesale threat.

“Look sir,” said one Monte Piedad resident to reporters in the weeks after the events, “I work in the government and have two small daughters. How do you think I would play pretend guerrilla? And yet, see how they left my apartment. There was no fucking sharpshooter here and they shot up my house like a strainer … It is true that there were people shooting against the soldiers, but this should never have been the reaction.”\textsuperscript{108}

This comment displayed a way understanding the violence to which they had been subject along lines of plausibility, reason, and historical precedent. Said another Monte Piedad resident when asked about sharpshooters in the area: “No, c’mon. Around here very few people got involved in that mess. How are you going to keep fighting with a 9mm against an Army that uses FALs and tanks? Plus, if there had been many sharpshooters as they say, the casualties on the other side would have been fairly high. And where are the dead soldiers?”\textsuperscript{109} In fact the military reported no casualties in the 23 de enero.

Instead, residents drew upon history to highlight what seemed most apparent from their experience: the evident disproportionality of the state’s response. “With all the firepower they had they could well have taken the blocks at a moment’s notice and stop whoever was shooting at them,” said a Monte Piedad resident to reporters. “It’s not as if

\textsuperscript{108} Redacción, “23 De Enero: Francotiradores O Víctimas?,” 111.

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.: 112.
it was a great logistical feat. Even the Metropolitan Police with fewer resources and
means has already done it many times.” In the end, the repression was a response of
imagined fear. “They unleashed on us. They thought us a subversive threat. They had to
terrorize the 23 de enero. They treated us like an executioner who is morbidly delighted
with its victim. There’s no other explanation.”
110 Coupled, this testimony reveals that residents at large were trying to understand the violence in the context of what was
normal through historical lenses. Unable to discern patterns, they could only dismiss the
state’s response as out of all normal bounds, even downplaying the role of local militants
in the engagements. “Next to this,” said a longtime worker at the national daily El
Nacional, “the fall of Pérez Jiménez was kid’s play.”
111 In this sense, the gulf between state and urban populace that had characterized the post-revolutionary fray following 23
January 1958 had now resurfaced, this time as a potentially pre-revolutionary moment, in
turn leading one analyst to ponder: “Who will close the gap?”
112

110 Ibid.


Conclusion

“We are still rebels”: The Challenge of Popular Participation in Bolivarian Venezuela

“Those were difficult days, and of profound conflicts.” In 1992, sitting in jail, Francisco Arias Cárdenas recalled his experience during the Caracazo to journalist Angela Zago. Months earlier, then-Lieutenant Colonel Arias Cárdenas had joined Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chávez and a cadre of fellow mid-level officers in a clandestine military movement nominally aimed at ousting President Carlos Andrés Pérez, but more broadly seeking to overturn a political system they considered had grown impassive to popular demands. At dawn on 4 February 1992, Arias Cardenas led his tank regiment into the streets of the western city of Maracaibo, capital of Zulia state, on a mission to detain the governor and seize control of the strategic, oil rich state. In Caracas, Chávez had taken control of the old Ministry of Defense headquarters in the Monte Piedad sector of the 23 de enero, overlooking the Miraflores Presidential Palace, from where he had planned to coordinate operations and capture President Pérez. But by 4 AM the attempted coup had failed. As jets readied to bomb the old Ministry headquarters, Chávez surrendered. Later that morning, in a live televised address, Chávez called on insurgent troops nationwide to lay down their weapons. “The country definitely has to head toward a better future,” he said, in the process becoming the public face of a coup,
and a movement, which seemed to echo the frustrations – and aspirations – of popular sectors in the wake of the Caracazo, and as such captured their imagination.¹

Over the next two years Chávez, Arias Cárdenas, and nearly 300 others sat behind bars, paying the price for a failed effort to seize state power. When presented with an opportunity to make sense of his involvement in the coup, Arias Cárdenas immediately seized upon the Caracazo. “Those events … stayed with me like a stamp on the soul and became one more reason, the decisive impulse, to throw myself three years later in the military uprising of 4 February.” At the time a Major stationed in the capital, Arias Cárdenas’s mobile artillery unit had been deployed to western Caracas to “‘restore order’ at all costs.” When he arrived in front of the superblocks of Lomas de Urdaneta, not far from the 23 de enero, Arias Cárdenas “watched as the officer who preceded me, in an inhuman and irresponsible way, fired against blocks.” By contrast, according to Arias Cárdenas’s account, when he assumed command he “was firmly convinced that I would not permit that the weapons and men under my command be used to massacre an unarmed, hungry, sacrificed people condemned to suffer the consequences of a set of economic measures that from any viewpoint was unjust and perverse.” He allegedly gathered his troops and ordered “that no one fire against the people without authorization, here we will only shoot when we are attacked with high caliber weapons.” And yet residents proved resourceful, challenging Arias Cárdenas with the reality of a conflict in which he very much stood on opposing lines. “They threw a toilet from a high floor in the blocks. It crashed against a tank, shattered and I thanked God because none of my

¹ Bart Jones, Hugo! The Hugo Chávez Story from Mud Hut to Perpetual Revolution (Hanover: Steerforth Press, 2007), 131-60.
soldiers had his head out of the tank, otherwise they would have killed him.” Still, Arias Cárdenas remained “firm in the position of not firing against the people, even while knowing I would win enemies within the Armed Forces.”

How do we interpret the testimony of this troubled participant in the Caracazo, one where Arias Cárdenas casts himself as unwilling executioner, determined to protect “the people” from its own Army and in doing so risking alienation by his peers? Recounted mere months after helping to lead a failed coup against Latin America’s oldest continuously running democracy, his narrative suggests an effort to lend popular legitimacy to a coup attempt that, while invoking “the people” as its banner, was nevertheless explicitly designed without popular participation in mind. Indeed what is clear is the designation of the Caracazo as a narrative device aimed at justifying rebellion. Invoked in this manner, the Caracazo emerges less as an event to be explained, than a moment to be deployed, granting legitimacy to claims about the irreconcilability of a political system claiming itself representative while engaging those it claimed to represent as enemies of war.

The deployment of the Caracazo as a device so early in the self legitimating process of those participating in the February 1992 coup is significant because it helps to highlight how and why in the ensuing years, the events of February and March 1989 would come to occupy a privileged and romanticized place in a narrative of rebellion and revolution ostensibly on behalf, in the name, though not yet, of “the people.” In November 1992 a second coup attempt rocked the government, though it, too, failed. In

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2 Angela Zago, La Rebelión De Los Angeles (Caracas: Fuentes Editores, 1992), 53-54.
1993 Congress accomplished what military dissidents had failed to do: it forced Pérez from office, to face trial for corruption. Later that year Venezuelans ended the rule of AD and COPEI, re-electing another one-time President, Rafael Caldera, at the head of a coalition of smaller parties and civil society groups. In 1994, responding to growing popular clamor, Caldera pardoned Chávez and his fellow coup plotters, whose popularity only accentuated as banking crises in the mid 1990s further contracted Venezuela’s already teetering economy. By 1998, Chávez had built an electoral movement promising a “peaceful revolution” built on an ideology of Bolivarianism – named after Venezuela’s nineteenth century independence hero – long in the making. In December, a cross class constituency swept him into the presidency, and as he took office in February 1999, he signaled the death knell of a “Fourth Republic” ushered in after the revolution of 1958. Addressing Congress, and the nation, Chávez said: “The constitution, and with it the ill-fated political system to which it gave birth forty years ago, has to die; it is going to die, sirs – accept it.” By year’s end Venezuelans indeed voted in a new constitution, marking the start of a new “Fifth Republic” while renaming their country Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

Arias Cárdenas’s reflections on the Caracazo and its aftermath in a discourse and practice of new beginnings expose the linearity of a narrative of massacre, collapse, redemption, and revolution that has come to define new accounts of Venezuela’s political history. Indeed, drawing on a discourse of revolution, Hugo Chávez has pointed to the

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4 Jones, Hugo!, 227.
Caracazo as a founding act in an emerging narrative of new beginnings and epic change in Venezuelan contemporary history. Summarizing the thrust of popular interpretations on the Caracazo, Richard Gott has asserted that “contemporary politics in Venezuela begin with the so-called Caracazo of February 1989,” calling it “an explosion of political rage.”

At a February 2002 mass rally to commemorate the Caracazo, Chávez’s brother Adán, then Minister of Education, was bolder still: “The people don’t forget. The revolution began on that day, and here are the people, defending their process of transformation.” Meanwhile Chávez himself has stressed how the Caracazo formed a linchpin in the clandestine organizing he had undertaken as a soldier since the early 1980s to overthrow Venezuela’s political system: “The Caracazo gave our [clandestine] movement a great boost. I’ve come to believe that without the Caracazo it would have been very difficult … for the military movement to gather strength.”

The narrative of events beginning with the Caracazo and ending with Chávez’s Bolivarian Revolution flows seamless into a meta-narrative of revolution anchored in marking “brutal ruptures with the past.” Indeed, reflecting on the rise of revolutionary movements since the Enlightenment, Hannah Arendt has noted that “The modern concept of revolution [is] inextricably bound up with the notion that the course of history suddenly begins anew, that an entirely new story, a story never known or told before, is

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about to unfold.”

It is this promise of a new beginning that transforms mere revolts – “visceral and spontaneous” – into revolutions capable of channeling deep-seated and long-developing popular disenchantment towards “a complete change of society.” Yet precisely because of their dramatic nature, the transformations characteristic of revolutionary change also account for the tensions that arise among internal factions as conflicts begin to surface over what specific shape new regimes should take. The “hiatus between the no-longer and the not-yet,” notes French political philosopher Myriam Revault, is the space where revolutionary projects turn within themselves, as in the Terror of the French Revolution or the purges of the Russian Revolution. What Mayer has called the “Furies” of internal strife, though strategically deployed by contemporaries as a broader struggle between revolutionary and reactionary currents, in fact result from competing ideologies embedded within revolutionary coalitions. As Mayer writes, “revolutionaries … resolve to institutionalize their own revolt at the expense of crushing all others in their drive to establish or impose their monopoly of centralized state power.”

To be sure, ideological differences among revolutionary factions stem from the clash of competing visions over the shape of the future. But these visions are forged in

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10 Mayer, The Furies, 30.
11 Arendt, On Revolution, 23.
12 Quote from Myriam Revault D’Allonnes, found in Mayer, The Furies, 37.
13 Ibid., 27.
14 Ibid., 30.
and against the backdrop of specific memories of the past, in the ways revolutionary factions remember their relationship with the ousted regime, and the strategies they deployed, at times over the course of decades, to usher in its downfall. In this context, if “revolutions are the only political events which confront us directly and inevitably with the problem of beginning,” as noted Arendt, then the internal battles characteristic of regime consolidation force us to consider another problem: revolutions confront their greatest challenge not in the construction of the future, but rather in the reconstruction of the past in a way that is commensurate with the grand project of radical change, all the while contending with conflicting memorializations of pre-revolutionary history.

Overcoming the problem of the past in the context of beginning anew requires what Frederick Corney, referring to 1917 Russia, has called “a new historical genealogy.” This new genealogy hinges on the narrative functions of “coherence, inexorability, and drama” to re-cast history in the service of a “Great Story,” capable of subsuming competing experiences of the pre-revolutionary past within a unified and unifying meta-narrative of the revolutionary present and future. In the construction of meta-narratives each trope serves a distinct but interrelated role: coherence seeks to silence “counter-narratives” that complicate the otherwise seamless Great Story; inexorability serves to legitimate the methods, form, and leadership revolutionary

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17 Ibid., 184.

18 Ibid., 47.
regimes eventually take; and drama works to highlight the paramount role of popular participation in a “founding act” of revolutionary fervor, the original event to which the ancestry of revolution can be traced in an effort “to persuade the masses that their lives were an inextricable part of this [particular] historical process.”\(^{19}\) Over time, “Told and retold, [founding narratives] become constituent parts of the social fabric, erasing or pushing aside alternative histories.”\(^{20}\) It is this pursuit of subsuming not just competing ideologies but entire “alternative histories” of struggle under a grand narrative arc, a narrative of both total and inevitable change, which challenges us to conceptualize revolution not only in terms of what is ushered in but also, and perhaps primarily, in terms of what is ushered out in the fray of regime consolidation. Examining alternative histories of revolutionary struggle against the backdrop of founding narratives provides the basis for understanding how, when, and why internecine struggles emerge from the initial stages of radical change.

It is this pursuit of subsuming not just competing ideologies but entire “alternative histories” of struggle under a grand narrative arc of sudden and inevitable rupture with the past that challenges us to conceptualize revolution not only in terms of what is ushered in but also, and perhaps primarily, in terms of what is ushered out in the fray of regime consolidation. It also suggests that revolutions confront their greatest challenge not in the construction of the future, but rather in the reconstruction of the past in ways

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 82.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 48.
commensurate with grand projects of radical change, all the while contending with
conflicting memorializations of pre-revolutionary history.

The trajectory of organizing and mobilization in el 23 highlights one such
alternative history, and the challenges it poses to the Bolivarian Revolution’s designs to
“refound the republic.”21 Indeed, as the Bolivarian project seeks to consolidate what
Chávez has long characterized as a “new historical phase in Venezuela,”22 it has come
increasingly to rely upon a historical genealogy that rests on the rise of Hugo Chávez as
the redeemer of long suffering popular sectors, whose political awakening can be traced,
at best, to the mid and late 1980s. And yet the case of el 23 suggests otherwise. What it
shows is that popular sectors’ long struggles to consolidate the promises of effective
government unleashed early on a contest over competing visions of democracy and
revolution. Indeed on one hand, el 23’s symbolism and location fueled intense cooptation
efforts; over time partisan networks emerged throughout the neighborhood on the basis of
access to and allocation of state resources. Similar organizing trends informed by
partisan political motivations also developed elsewhere in el 23. Yet when these
networks failed to reap community benefits, residents deployed the same symbolic and
spatial qualities to mobilize media attention around forms of collective action that moved
in and out of the terrain of legal and extra-legal protest. These tactics gave rise to
alternative local networks of resistance that arose in parallel to clientelist webs in el 23.
For instance in the 1960s anti-establishment groups waged urban guerrilla struggle, while


in the 1970s community groups emphasizing local needs took to the streets to protest public service deficiencies. Their convergence in the early 1980s would signal the rise of a distinctly popular political culture able to navigate both liberal and radical tendencies.

Today these currents remain vibrant. Indeed, since Chávez’s election, the 23 de enero has long been considered one of his staunchest bases of urban popular support for Chávez, the kind journalists use words like “stronghold” and “hard core” to describe. A mural outside the offices of the jefe civil in the Mirador sector of the neighborhood reads “23 de enero, bastion of the revolution” (see Figure 22). It is here where Chávez comes to cast ballots amid enthusiastic crowds. Several of the programs that would become highly popular misiones were piloted in the 23 de enero. And election returns from nationwide contests consistently locate the neighborhood as one of the three major areas of electoral support in Caracas for Chávez and pro-government candidates. For instance in 2004, during recall referendum called by opponents, Chávez received 69 percent of support in the 23 de enero as voters rejected the recall, the third highest among 22


24 In April 2003, 53 Cuban physicians arrived in ten parishes in Caracas, including the 23 de enero. These doctors were the first in a program that would become Barrio Adentro, aimed at providing popular classes with direct access to primary health care Yolanda D’Elia, ed., Las Misiones Sociales En Venezuela: Una Aproximación a Su Comprensión Y Análisis (Caracas: Instituto Latinoamericano de Investigaciones Sociales, 2006), 25.. In May 2003, Chávez granted the first urban land titles to Urban Land Committees (CTU) from four Caracas communities, including the 23 de enero. CTUs were organized to help normalize tenancy for squatter communities in Caracas, a program that generated an enormous amount of organizational and electoral support to Chávez David Coleman, "Venezuela's Chavez Hands over Land Deeds to Caracas Slum Dwellers," BBC Worldwide Monitoring, 12 May 2003.. In August 2005, Chávez again provide CTUs in the 23 de enero with the first funds based on “communal project” proposal, a project that would set the stage for eventual “communal councils” entrusted with management of community resources Hugo Chávez, Construyendo El Poder Popular (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, 30 August 2005 [cited]; available from http://www.mre.gov.ve/Noticias/Presidente-Chavez/A2005/Discurso-242.htm..
parishes in Caracas. In parliamentary elections in October 2004, Chávez’s party, the MVR, obtained 90 percent of the vote in the 23 de enero, the fourth highest. Finally, in the 2006 Presidential elections, the 23 de enero returned 76 percent for Chávez, again the third largest margin of support in Caracas. But alongside expressions of support also arise challenges to the hegemony of chavismo. Consider the following. On 2 April 2005 voters in the 23 de enero neighborhood in downtown Caracas took to the polls to participate in an historic election (see Figure 23). Over two dozen candidates representing a wide variety of local groups, linked nevertheless in shared support of President Hugo Chávez, sought to consolidate a single slate of pro-government forces ahead of nationwide neighborhood elections scheduled for August. At first glance these local level primaries, unique in Venezuela, highlighted the gains of grassroots activism under Chávez. Indeed since first taking office in 1999, Chávez’s calls to consolidate poder popular – popular power – by promoting grassroots participation in the democratic process had remained a common discursive thread. But beyond a dynamic electoral agenda including six nationwide referenda in six years, concrete signs of how “participative democracy” might in fact be consolidated on the ground remained scarce. In this context, promoting organic community leadership

25 Only Antimano (77 percent) and Macarao (74 percent) returned higher totals in the 2004 referendum. El Junquito (92 percent), Catedral (92 percent), and Macarao (91 percent) returned higher totals in October 2004. In 2006, Antimano (81) and Macarao (79) returned higher totals. Data available from: http://www.cne.gob.ve/

through local-level primary elections lent credibility to what had largely remained a whim.

Yet a closer look revealed more about the limits than the possibilities of popular power under Chávez. Indeed primaries in the 23 de enero reflected long simmering tensions between national chavista parties and “Electoral Battle Units” (UBEs), which emerged in June 2004 after anti-chavistas mounted a successful signature drive demanding a recall referendum against the President. That the referendum took place at all reflected the failure of chavista parties to convince voters against calling for the vote. Ironically Chávez himself secured their defeat, long railing against bureaucracy and elitism in political parties of old, but in the process mining the credibility of political parties at large, including his own. By contrast, UBEs functioned as five to ten person committees designed to mobilize voters at the most local level by bypassing party bureaucracy. By August, UBEs and their grassroots get-out-the-vote campaign helped score a referendum victory for Chávez. In October, they would secure another victory, helping Chávez-backed candidates sweep regional elections.

These various successes pitted locally-based UBEs against national chavista parties as the legitimate interlocutors of popular power. Unsurprisingly, that contest came to a head in the run up to local elections in 2005. Along the way UBE members were barred from state media, denied electoral resources, and prohibited from running as

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official *chavista* candidates. In response, UBEs and other neighborhood groups in the 23 de enero formed “electoral committees” to conduct independent primaries. Once held, the winning candidates created FUP23 (United Popular Front 23 de enero) as an electoral vehicle to run in the August elections, eventually coming third in the neighborhood behind the officially sanctioned *chavista* party and the Communist Party, both with national reach. Days later, FUP23 candidates staged a protest at the doors of the National Electoral Council to denounce the pressures to which they had been subject throughout the campaign process, revealing the strength of traditions of struggle well expressed in the caption of a local placard: with or without revolution, “*Seguimos siendo rebeldes*” (we are still rebels).

But a still-closer look at the development of local primaries exposed a sharper contest, this one internal to the very social and political organization that lends the 23 de enero its iconoclastic image. Weeks prior, when mounting discontent over upcoming local elections first turned into proposals for autonomous primaries, community activists representing *juntas de condominio* (condo associations), armed *colectivos*, athletic and cultural cooperatives, and *chavista* parties assembled to discuss logistics. These included, the same groups who earlier, disenchanted with what they regarded as the government’s inability to confront the opposition government of Caracas, had coordinated an assault against city police, forcing Chávez to distance his government from what he referred to

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as “anarchic groups” in el 23.\textsuperscript{30} Despite their differences they hoped to reach consensus on the basis of a successful and also unprecedented collective effort to self-designate the jefe civil, an open challenge to the recently-elected chavista mayor.

Yet instead of collaboration the assemblies provided a space for infighting. Long-standing personal feuds fed claims that some sought elected office merely out of personal ambition. Others confronted charges of blind partisanship to Chávez rather than to “participative democracy” and its best-implementation in the parish. Still others faced reproach as opportunists, on grounds that they lacked a track-record of involvement in the conflicts that shaped the 23 de enero’s history. Advocates of a completely independent primary squared off against those arguing for at least some measure of institutional oversight, as represented in the proposed participation of the local electoral board to lend legal legitimacy to the process. In turn, concerns regarding possible cooptation either by the state or by particular strands of activism in the 23 de enero limited the support of groups that had long combined institutional and extra-institutional, legal and extra-legal forms of pressure in their repertoire of collective action.

In the end only a handful of community groups moved forward with the primaries. These drew mainly from legally-chartered organizations like the Asociación Civil Antonio José de Sucre – a self-identified “civil society” group that congregates over 50 condo and barrio associations in the 23 de enero, securing public investment in the parish through close ties with state institutions. Against this backdrop, the underlying tensions behind local primaries well illustrate what one local leader calls the “paradox” of

community activism in the 23 de enero: “For many of us who are in this social, cultural, and political struggle, 23 de enero means that we are parish that doesn’t keep quiet. That we always have a voice of protest, a voice of struggle, a voice of organization. We are … the most political parish; the most organized of all parishes. But at the same time – and here you feel the paradox – within our organization, we are the most disorganized.”

What accounts for these conflicting currents of loyalty and disloyalty in the heart of chavismo? How do we make sense of these wide ranging expressions of local autonomy, from primary elections to armed conflict? What influences shape popular understandings of the limits and possibilities of revolutionary change in Venezuela? What are the contours of what Sujatha Fernandes has called “critical social movements,” neither independent from nor beholden to Chávez? Indeed, since Chávez’s election scholars have cast the link between urban popular sectors – from where chavismo consistently draws its “strongest base of electoral support” – on his rhetoric and style and on the government’s social spending largesse. In turn, these features anchored a debate about the degree to which the “Bolivarian Revolution” espoused by Chávez was merely a reprise of populist politics disguised in revolutionary rhetoric, drawing on a familiar model: “Personalistic leaders attained and wielded power by establishing a seemingly direct relationship to the heterogeneous, weakly organized, politically

31 Joel Capriles, Interview with author, 12 January 2004.

32 Fernandes, "A View from the Barrios: Hugo Chávez as an Expression of Urban Popular Movements."

33 In a study of polling data prior to the 1998 presidential elections, Damarys Canache uncovered how the proportion of poll respondents “who expected to vote for Hugo Chávez” drew significantly from working, middle, and upper class, breaking down into 55%, 44%, and 47% respectively. Damarys Canache, "Urban Poor and Political Order," in The Unraveling of Representative Democracy in Venezuela, ed. Jennifer L. McCoy and David Myers (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 46.
available masses [using] economic and social policies as instruments for attracting support.\(^{34}\)

Yet, even when framed as economic, electoral, or classical populism,\(^{35}\) the foundations of the *chavista* political project among urban popular sectors has again and again escaped simple definition, especially after 2002-2003 when the government survived general strikes, mass opposition protests, a civilian-military coup attempt, and a crippling oil industry strike largely by relying on the mobilization and continued support of urban popular sectors. This resiliency in the face of such dramatic challenges, and despite a notable lack of tangible benefits before the onset of direct social spending in early 2004, gave rise to theories about the “origins of chavismo,”\(^{36}\) which took seriously


\(^{35}\) In a recent comparative study of 1990s Peru and Bolivarian Venezuela, Kenneth Roberts has clarified the variants of populism to include not just the structural factors leading to the rise of populist politics, but the ways in which the domestic and international conflicts spawned by populist regimes alter the nature of their governance styles, either by attempting to harness popular mobilization through the formation of parties or by encouraging dispersion and heterogeneity, both for strategic gain. The three variants – economic, electoral, and classical – correspond to the main models on which Roberts builds his study. Economic populism derives from the definitions of neo-populism that sought to explain the marriage of populist leaders and neoliberal policy in the 1990s. Following rational-choice paradigms, this model rested on the notion of a pragmatic populace who would spurn ideology and vote for candidates with the greatest promise to return economic benefit. Electoral populism is his term for a the manner in which populist leaders secure the backing of transactional voters, those driven primarily by platforms of “anti-politics” that rest on the besmirching of politics as usual and the promises of that an outsider might propitiate significantly shake up the reigning political-institutional system. Classical populism best draws from the work of Carlos de la Torre on the discursive links between leaders and popular masses. It stresses a sociological component to the kinds of visceral loyalty that cannot be explained by pragmatism or anti-politics. Kenneth M. Roberts, "Populism, Political Conflict, and Grass-Roots Organization in Latin America," *Journal of Comparative Politics* 38, no. 2 (2006).

\(^{36}\) Javier Corrales, "Explaining Chavismo: The Unexpected Alliance of Radical Leftists and Generals in Venezuela since the Late 1990s" (paper presented at the Venezuelan Economic Growth 1970-2005 (2nd), Harvard University, 28-29 April 2006), 9.
Chávez’s claims that the Bolivarian Revolution was not a moment but a movement. In this sense recent studies have coincided in their efforts to complicate the common thread among populist interpretations, that of an omnipotent figure dictating orders while maintaining a visceral link to downtrodden masses. Instead they see an ideologically diverse leadership within chavismo, drawing from years of strategic plotting to wrest power, and ideological fine-tuning to consolidate it as a popular movement. Steve Ellner’s study of competing currents within chavismo’s leadership captures the debate between “the call for an immediate creation of parallel organizations and institutions to replace the old ones and achieve a complete break with the past” on one hand, and on the other hand, “ushering far reaching change short of revolution or socialism … [including] the creation of mass based parties and democratic institutions.”

Javier Corrales, examining similar tensions pitting radical approaches toward effecting change against reformist currents of long-term institution building within the confines of liberal democracy, argues that the two currents emerge from the alliance of military and leftist civilians that long formed the core of the clandestine movement to overthrow Venezuela’s bipartisan system. Ellner and Corrales paint a complex image of

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38 Ellner refers to these strands as “revolutionary opportunity” and “non-revolutionary transformation,” both of which have their roots in the experiments at popularizing politics in the 1930s and 1940s in Latin America in the case of the latter, and the Cuban Revolution of 1959 in the case of the former. Elsewhere these debates are framed as a tension between reformism and radicalism. Steve Ellner, “Revolutionary and Non-Revolutionary Paths of Radical Populism: Directions of the Chavista Movement in Venezuela,” Science and Society 69, no. 2 (2005): 161-62.

39 Corrales, "Explaining Chavismo".
chavismo’s composition, in turn suggesting that these competing currents may have provided a space where different constituencies could find a place during the tumultuous years between Chávez’s election in 1998 and his 2004 referendum victory, thus ensuring its continued majority appeal.

Yet both leave unexplored the ways in which these undercurrents of ideological complexity also permeate popular sectors, imbuing the revolutionary cadre with conflicting pressures of their own but from below. In Ellner’s case, popular sectors emerge as the civil society complement to the radical currents within chavista policymaking, again and again constituting the most “hard-line” among Chávez’s constituency.\(^{40}\) For Corrales, problematizing the image of chavismo takes the form of a “supply-side theory” capable of accounting for why and how seemingly contradictory social sectors – mid-level military officers and leftist intellectuals – found common cause in the 1990s. This strategic alliance, notes Corrales, was eventually successful at channeling an already radical popular mass constituted in the wake of market reforms in the late 1980s and early 1990s: “blaming neoliberalism … helps to provide a partial answer to the question of the origins of chavismo: it explains the demand side but not the supply side. It can explain the rise of the poor, and the overwhelming demand for a radical change in politics, but it does not explain the actual change provided.”\(^{41}\)

Still, even tentative efforts to consider the political nature of urban popular sectors before the rise of chavismo suggest that their patterns of mobilization during the Chávez

\(^{40}\) Ellner, “Revolutionary and Non-Revolutionary Paths of Radical Populism,” 171-73.

\(^{41}\) Corrales, “Explaining Chavismo”, 9.
presidency cannot be fully accounted for by the unraveling of distributive policies in the neo-liberal era. David Myers has observed how political elites in the pre-1998 regime weakened their own political system “by blocking access to policy making for several important groups,” of which “the urban poor constituted the largest.” For Myers, “The urban underclass appeared dangerous and threatening to AD [Acción Democrática, Democratic Action] and COPEI [the two major parties of the era]. Their government attempted to dampen hostility among slum dwellers by distributing goods that included subsidized food, public services, housing, and public sector jobs. However, neither of the establishment political parties succeeded in organizing urban popular sectors. Slum dwellers as a group subsequently split their vote between AD and COPEI but remained distrustful of both.”

Myers falls short of specifying the underpinnings of partisan “distrust” among urban popular sectors. Nevertheless his appraisal does challenge us to consider that the development of popular political consciousness predated the rise and later unraveling of distributive politics. As such, this consciousness likely transcends the economic determinism that has hitherto anchored its analysis. As Daniel Levine starkly posed in 2002:

The protest cycle of the last decade or so draws on a long, and as yet, for the most part, unwritten history of organization, communication, and the articulation of positions. New groups and informal networks were created, whose continuing social presence shaped new issues, and served as points of attraction that elicited citizen interest, gave experience in common action, and nurtured activism on a small scale. Networks of this kind are not proto-parties,

---

but rather loose collections of individuals and groups. They provide a generative base for issues, a place for testing ideas and trying out strategies.\footnote{Daniel Levine, "The Decline and Fall of Democracy in Venezuela: Ten Theses," \textit{Bulletin of Latin American Research} 21, no. 2 (2002): 260.}

Levine’s formula alerts us to the need to cast urban sectors in the same historical light, indeed perhaps more sharply, as a fraught constituency imbued with its own ideological contradictions, which changed over time as the “distrust” of the political system by urban popular sectors ebbed and flowed, incorporated patterns of democracy while also crafting new strategies and interpretations of democracy out of their experiences with the failures of that system.

Against this backdrop, the 23 de enero’s history of organizing and mobilization sets in relief the need to cast urban sectors as a fraught constituency imbued with its own ideological contradictions, which changed over time as residents’ disenchantment with national politics ebbed and flowed, incorporated patterns of representative democracy while also crafting more radical strategies and interpretations of democratic change out of their experiences with the failures of pactism. The shifting loyalties, contradictory tactics, and internal divisions that underlay these seemingly at odds traditions ensured that visions of a democratic society would vary as widely as the strategies used to wage protest against the state’s shortcomings. For some, it would involve expressing political dissent through local primaries. For others, it would involve more radical means, like taking up arms to defend against reformist currents in government.

Yet the common thread remained as it does today, a sense of community built around the pursuit of a contingent autonomy, neither fully independent from nor fully
beholden to the state. As such, it is a relationship marked by negotiation and conflict, drawn in turn from an experience of activism dating to well before the rise of either Hugo Chávez or economic crisis in Venezuela. As one long-time activist in *el 23* comments, “Chávez did not produce the movements, we created him. He has helped us tremendously, but what is going on here cannot be ascribed solely to Chávez.” Revisiting the *pactist* period with an eye toward local politics provides the basis for understanding how, when, and why internecine struggles emerge from the initial stages of radical change.

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44 As Sujatha Fernandes argues, “To see Chávez as an independent figure pontificating from above, or popular movements as originating in autonomous spaces from below would be to deny the interdependencies that have made possible Chávez’s emergence and sustained access to power” Fernandes, “A View from the Barrios: Hugo Chávez as an Expression of Urban Popular Movements,” 18.

45 Parenti, "Hugo Chávez and Petro-Populism."
Maps

### List of Dead – January 1958

<table>
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<th>Date</th>
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<td>Juan Francisco Oliveros</td>
<td>43</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hector Guillen</td>
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<td>Juana Castro</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Cañada-Mt. Piedad</td>
<td>22 Jan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hernan López Gonzalez</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Luis Rafael Blanco</td>
<td>23</td>
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<td>Francisco Manuel Ferrer</td>
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<td>Mauricio José Delgado</td>
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<td>Carmelo Hernández</td>
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<td>Manuel Tabariz</td>
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<td>La Cañada</td>
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<td>Carlos H. Cuñar</td>
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<td>Monte Piedad</td>
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<td>José Alejandro López Rojas</td>
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<td>Mirador</td>
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<td>Enrique Napoleón Soto Vilera</td>
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<td>Sierra Maestra</td>
<td>5 Mar</td>
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1 List compiled from: "161 Muertos Y 477 Heridos Es El Balance Trágico De La Lucha Por La Libertad.", "Balance Trágico De La Revolución.", "Cinco Nuevas Víctimas Enterraron Ayer.", "Murieron Trágicamente 93 Personas En Caracas."

2 List compiled from: Registro Civil de Defunción, Jefatura Civil, Parroquia 23 de enero; Araujo, "23 De Enero: Vivir Entre Balas.", Mundaraín, "A 18 Años Del Caracazo: Sed De Justicia.", Redacción, "23 De Enero: Francotiradores O Víctimas?."
Tables and Graphs

Graph 1: Rate of Expropriations

Rate of Expropriations
2 de diciembre/23 de enero, 1955-1959

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<td>4-59</td>
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Graph 2: Non-AD/COPEI Vote, as percentage of total, 23 de enero

URD (Union Republicana Democrática, center left); IPFN (Independiente Pro-Frente Nacional, center left); FDP (Frente Democrático Popular, center right); CCN (Cruzada Cívica Nacionalista, right); PCV (Partido Comunista de Venezuela, left); MEP (Movimiento Electoral del Pueblo, center left); MAS (Movimiento al Socialismo, center left).
Table 1: Congressional Vote, 23 de enero

<table>
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<td>COPEI (23E)</td>
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<td>11.7</td>
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<td>17.7</td>
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<td>Other (23E)</td>
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<td>AD/COPEI (natl)</td>
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Table 2: Presidential Vote, 23 de enero

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<td>37.2</td>
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<td>88.8</td>
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<td>6.5</td>
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Graph 3: Congressional AD/COPEI and Other vote (percent), 23 de enero

Graph 4: Congressional AD, COPEI, and Other vote (percent), 23 de enero
Graph 5: Congressional AD/COPEI and Other vote (percent), 23 de enero and National

Graph 6: Presidential AD/COPEI, and Other Vote (percent), 23 de enero
Graph 9: Selected Age Groups by Rate of Growth, Venezuela

Graph 10: Selected Age Groups as Percentage of Total Population, Venezuela

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5 Venezuela, X Censo De Poblacion Y Vivienda: Resumen Por Entidades Federales.
Figures

Figure 1: 2 December 1955, Pres. Gen. Marcos Pérez Jiménez inaugurates *Unidad Residencial 2 de diciembre*, phase one (Monte Piedad).
Source: Archivo Audiovisual de la Nación, Colección de Fotografía Documental, Serie Oficina de Prensa de Miraflores.
Figure 2: 2 December 1955, Pres. Gen. Marcos Pérez Jiménez inaugurates *Unidad Residencial 2 de diciembre*, phase one (Monte Piedad).

Source: Archivo Audiovisual de la Nación, Colección de Fotografía Documental, Serie Oficina de Prensa de Miraflores.
Figure 3: June – November 1955, construction of Unidad Residencial 2 de diciembre, phase one (Monte Piedad), as seen from Avenida Urdaneta.
Source: Archivo Audiovisual de la Nación, Colección de Fotografía Documental, Serie Oficina Central de Información.
Figure 4 (left) 30 April 1949, inaugural issue of Laberinto, independent bi-weekly broadside (right) 14 May 1949 issue.
Source: Mr. Juan Martinez.
Figure 5: c. December 1957. Cesar Acuña (center) and brothers, posing on roof of recently completed blocks 45-46-47, Unidad Residencial 2 de diciembre, third phase (Mirador).
Source: Mr. Cesar Acuña.
Figure 6: 23 January 1958.  
Source: El Universal.
Figure 7: c. 24-25 January 1958. Women and children await distribution of keys. *Urbanización 23 de enero, Cañada de la Iglesia.*

Source: Archivo Audiovisual de la Nación, Colección de Fotografía Documental, Serie Oficina Central de Información.
Figure 8: c. June 1958. Children plant tree in *La Cañada de la Iglesia*.
Source: Archivo Audiovisual de la Nación, Colección de Fotografía Documental, Serie Oficina Central de Información.
Figure 9: 7 September 1958. Barracks in the Avenida Urdaneta.
Source: Tribuna Popular
Figure 10: 5 December 1958. “State of Alert!”
Source: Ultimas Noticias
Figure 11: c. 1966. Barrio Sucre, as seen from Redoma del Bloque 7, 23 de enero (La Cañada de la Iglesia, Monte Piedad).
Source: Archivo Audiovisual de la Nación, Colección de Fotografía Documental, Serie Oficina Central de Información.
Figure 12: 17 January 1974, children at play behind blocks 54-55-56, Sierra Maestra, 23 de enero.
Figure 13: c. 1975. Mrs. Pastora de Guevara (center) with youth soccer team from blocks 52-53, Sierra Maestra, 23 de enero. Source: Courtesy Mrs. Pastora de Guevara.
Figure 14: 17 March 1980. Unknown block, 23 de enero.
Figure 15: 23 December 1981. Emergency trash collection operation, Monte Piedad, 23 de enero.
Source: C.A. Editora El Nacional, Archivo de Imágenes. (Photo Giorgio Lombardi)
Figure 16: 7 December 1984. Self defense brigade, block 37, Zona E, 23 de enero. Source: C.A. Editora El Nacional, Archivo de Imágenes. (Photo Luis Guilera)
Figure 17: 6 June 1989. Bullet holes in block 22, Zona Central, 23 de enero. C.A.
Source: Editora El Nacional, Archivo de Imágenes. (Photo Tomás Grillo)

Figure 18: c. 1 March 1989, Avenida Sucre, background Block 15, La Cañada.
Source: El Nacional, Photo Tomás Grillo
Figure 19: c. 3 March 1989. Block 22.
Source: El Nacional, Photo Tomás Grillo.

Figure 20: c. 3 March 1989, 23 de enero, in front of Block 22, Zona Central.
Source: El Nacional, Photo Tomás Grillo.
Figure 21: 21 June 1989. “Against expensive food, unemployment and repression, organize and struggle. New Man Cultural Group” mural, Zona Central, 23 de enero.
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C.A. Editora El Nacional
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Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos
Biblioteca Conjunta
Ref. Inf. no. 83/98: Caso N. 11.455 Venezuela
Box: Caso del Caracazo (Aguilera la Rosa), Original, Fondo, Tomo I y II,
Reparaciones, y Anexos

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Instituto Autónomo Biblioteca Nacional
Archivo Audiovisual de la Nación
Colección de Fotografía Documental
Serie Oficina Central de Información
Serie Oficina de Prensa de Miraflores

Personal Archive, Mr. Lorenzo Acosta (Parr. 23 de enero, Caracas)

Personal Archive, Mr. Alexis Alzolay (Parr. 23 de enero, Caracas)

Personal Archive, Mrs. Pastora de Guevara (Parr. 23 de enero, Caracas)

Personal Archive, Mr. Ramón López (Parr. 23 de enero, Caracas)

Personal Archive, Mr. Juan Martinez (Parr. 23 de enero, Caracas)

Personal Archive, Mr. Cesar Acuña (Parr. 23 de enero, Caracas)

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El Nacional

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El Tiempo (Colombia)

El Universal

Financial Times

Gaceta del Pueblo

Gaceta Municipal del Gobierno del Distrito Federal

Gaceta Oficial

Granma

La Voz

Miami Herald
Theses and Dissertations


Books and Articles


El Bravo Pueblo. López Maya, Margarita, Caracas.


Author Biography

Alejandro Velasco was born in La Victoria, Venezuela on August 23, 1978 and grew up in Caracas, Venezuela. In 2000, he graduated with a B.A. in History and Communications from Boston College in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts. In 2002, based on research funded by the Duke University Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies, Velasco earned a Master’s degree from the Department of History at Duke University, with a thesis entitled: “The Hidden Injuries of Race: Democracy, Color, and Political Consciousness in Venezuela.” In 2004 Velasco advanced to Ph.D. candidacy with research fields in Venezuela and Modern Latin America, and teaching fields in Colonial Latin America and African American Studies. Supported by an International Dissertation Research Fellowship from the Social Science Research Council, and with additional funding from an Albert J. Beveridge Grant from the American Historical Association, Velasco carried out eighteen months of archival and ethnographic research in Caracas between 2004 and 2005. In 2006, as Five College Fellow, Velasco taught at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts. In 2007 Velasco joined the faculty of New York University’s Gallatin School as Assistant Professor of Latin American Studies, where he teaches interdisciplinary seminars on social movements, urban studies, and democratization, including a two-semester sequence on the region’s urban history, culture, and politics. An article by Velasco entitled “‘We Are Still Rebels’: The Challenge of Popular History in Bolivarian Venezuela” will appear in Participation, Politics, and Culture in Venezuela’s Bolivarian Democracy, edited by Daniel Hellinger and David Smilde and forthcoming from the Duke University Press in 2010.