Thwarting Electoral Revolution:
The Communal State and Authoritarian Consolidation in Venezuela

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“Nada es tan peligroso como dejar permanecer largo tiempo en un ciudadano el poder. El pueblo se acostumbra a obedecerle y él se acostumbra a mandarlo; de donde se origina la usurpación y la tiranía.”

“Nothing is as dangerous as vesting power in one citizen for a prolonged period of time. The people become accustomed to obeying him, and he becomes accustomed to commanding, hence the origin of usurpation and tyranny.”

–Simón Bolívar, 1819
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Abstract

In 2017, Venezuela appeared to be on the brink of democratic transition. After former president Hugo Chávez’s death and amid a crippling humanitarian crisis, Venezuela’s quasi-authoritarian regime lost in the country’s 2015 parliamentary elections. According to studies on rapid transitions out of autocracy, the electoral defeat, combined with deteriorating socioeconomic conditions and prolonged social unrest in 2016 and 2017, should have resulted in democratic transition. Today, however, Venezuela remains under the regime’s control and continues to sink deeper into authoritarianism.

This thesis argues that the Venezuelan regime’s political survival was the result of two strategies for authoritarian consolidation that began developing once Chávez came to power in 1999. The first was a military strategy focused on maintaining the Armed Forces’ loyalty and protecting against popular mobilization. The second was a bottom-up strategy centered on a series of communal governance structures that later evolved into mechanisms for social control. The gradual development of these consolidation strategies over the years is what ultimately allowed the Venezuelan regime to thwart democratic transition in 2017.
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It is extraordinarily difficult to describe the helplessness one feels as a Venezuelan abroad, unable to satisfactorily respond to the chaos and suffering back home. Analyzing the situation in Venezuela and sharing that knowledge with others is among the few ways we can make a difference. This thesis is my small contribution to that effort, which is why I am so incredibly thankful to everyone who made it possible.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge my fellow Venezuelans, who never tire in their fight for democracy and refuse to submit to autocratic rule, despite unimaginable suffering. The unwavering tenacity of Venezuela’s people is truly unparalleled.

Los buenos somos más.
Chapter I: Introduction

The evening of December 6th 2015, Venezuela eagerly waited for the results of its parliamentary elections. As the night transitioned into the early hours of the morning, television screens across the country broadcasted the pressroom of the National Electoral Council (Consejo Nacional Electoral, CNE), where preliminary election results are historically announced. Rumors of an opposition victory spread across social media platforms, but only an official bulletin would verify these speculations. The president of the CNE, Tibisay Lucena, finally took the stage at 12:32AM, confirming the rumors that the government party had been defeated. The opposition (Mesa de la Unidad Democrática, MUD) had won a majority of 99 seats in the National Assembly while the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) obtained 46 seats. Within minutes, fireworks celebrating the victory lit the skies of Caracas. It seemed a new era was beginning in Venezuela.

The final vote count revealed that the opposition had in fact won a resounding two-thirds majority in the National Assembly, with a total of 112 seats. This was an unprecedented, historic victory for Venezuela’s opposition parties, establishing the first ever opposition-majority National Assembly since President Hugo Chávez first came to power in 1999. In the 16 years under Chavismo, Venezuela held nearly 18 elections and referenda, virtually all of which resulted in

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1 The “opposition” colloquially refers to the Democratic Unity Roundtable (Mesa de la Unidad Democrática in Spanish), which is the coalition of parties that opposed Hugo Chávez’s PSUV.
2 19 electoral races remained too close to call
3 The PSUV obtained the remaining 55 seats.
4 Term used to denominate Chávez’s left-leaning political ideology; in this thesis, “Chavismo” is used comprehensively to refer to the ideology, the Chavista state, and the PSUV.
victories for Chávez and his party. These electoral processes, however, were rarely held within the framework of free and fair electoral competition. Until the 2015 parliamentary elections, Chávez’s PSUV governed Venezuela under increasing competitive authoritarianism. That is, although competitive elections were held, the ruling party’s overwhelming institutional power made significant electoral victories highly improbable for any political opposition. The existing literature on democratic transitions suggests that that the 2015 parliamentary elections should have been a turning point for Venezuela. Nearly four years later, though, the country still remains under authoritarian control.

**Competitive Authoritarianism**

In the field of comparative politics, hybrid regimes are those that demonstrate both democratic and authoritarian qualities. These regimes seek the legitimacy derived from democratic processes while simultaneously protecting against the unpredictability of perfect electoral competition. Political scientists Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, noting the rise of pseudodemocracies in the wake of the Cold War, coined the term “competitive authoritarian” to describe hybrid regimes. Under competitive authoritarianism, “formal democratic institutions are widely viewed as the principal means of obtaining and exercising political authority, [but] incumbents violate those rules so often and to such an extent that the regime fails to meet conventional minimum standards for democracy.”

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5 The only exception was the 2007 referendum to amend the Constitution, which Chávez lost by a slight margin.
Despite the institutional disadvantages for opposition forces under competitive authoritarianism, they can still “challenge, weaken, and occasionally even defeat autocratic incumbents” in four arenas of democratic contestation: the electoral arena, the legislature, the judiciary, and the media. These arenas are almost always non-existent (or subjugated) under complete autocracy but are usually at least partially contestable under competitive authoritarianism. The electoral arena, though, is the most important; elections must be contestable in spite of “large-scale abuses of state power, biased media coverage, harassment of opposition candidates and activists, and an overall lack of transparency.”

Still, the guise of democratic competition is not a new phenomenon. Andreas Schedler and Larry Diamond both recognize that elections have been used historically as a means for authoritarian control, in addition to democratic governance. Today, this electoral variety of authoritarianism has become the most common form since the Cold War ended. Varying levels of permissible electoral competition, however, warrant more nuanced distinctions between electoral autocracies. Diamond differentiates authoritarian regimes based on their given degrees of competitiveness, distinguishing between competitive (electoral) authoritarianism, hegemonic authoritarianism, and politically closed authoritarianism. Hegemonic regimes are uncompetitive, despite having multiparty systems and holding periodic elections, and viable opposition candidates are usually

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8 Ibid, 55.
barred from running. Politically closed regimes, in contrast, generally do not tolerate the existence of opposition forces and tend not to engage in electoral processes, competitive or otherwise.\textsuperscript{11}

Venezuela under Hugo Chávez (1999-2013) and Nicolás Maduro\textsuperscript{12} operated within the framework of competitive authoritarianism until the 2015 parliamentary elections. From 1999 to 2015 Venezuela’s Chavista government gradually made use of institutional advantages to ensure its political survival, skewing elections in its favor and inhibiting opposition parties from coming to power (See Chapter 3). The 2015 election was fraught with electoral irregularities. The government-controlled CNE’s design for the electronic ballot was a small yet quintessential example of the PSUV’s competitive authoritarian character (See Appendix). The vast majority of the parties shown were aligned with the PSUV, while the opposition’s box appeared in the bottom left corner, featuring their acronym (MUD) and logo (which includes the word Unidad). The logos for the parties placed directly above and to the right also featured the word Unidad, and the PSUV-ally MIN-Unidad’s name is remarkably similar to the opposition’s MUD-Unidad. In the state of Aragua, the MIN-Unidad candidate for the district had the exact same name as the opposition’s candidate, Ismael García. Additionally, MIN-Unidad led a deceptive propaganda campaign to confuse voters by displaying propaganda outside the official campaign period that read, “We are the Opposition” (See Appendix).\textsuperscript{13} This is only one example of the regime’s competitive authoritarian character during the 2015 elections.

\textsuperscript{11} Diamond, “Hybrid Regimes,” 25.

\textsuperscript{12} Chávez handpicked Maduro as his successor before dying of cancer in 2013.

\textsuperscript{13} In Spanish, “Somos la Oposición"
Still, the opposition’s landslide victory in 2015 appears to contradict the framework for competitive authoritarianism outlined thus far. If Venezuela was truly competitive authoritarian under the PSUV, such an electoral victory should have been nearly impossible. In fact, although incumbents often hold decisive advantages in these types of regimes, the electoral component can sometimes backfire and lead to unexpected transitions. These transitions, however, are uncertain and can swing towards either authoritarianism or democracy.

**Electoral Revolution**

Diamond posits three general models of democratic transition: *transformation from above*, *negotiated transitions*, and *replacement* (or *rupture*). A transformation from above is the most straightforward and involves the ruling authoritarian elite imposing and managing the democratic change, as well as the constitutional framework. Examples include mid-1970s Spain, early-1980s Turkey, and late-1980s Hungary.\(^{14}\) Negotiated transitions are more complicated and usually begin with splits among the authoritarian elites, but can be driven by external actors as well. These transitions allow for negotiations between elites and with the opposition, sometimes resulting in the development of “an underlying framework of ‘consensual unity’ on the rules of the game.”\(^{15}\) The nature of negotiated transitions stemming from elite bargaining can sometimes result in lower-quality democracy. Replacement- or rupture-based transitions involve the sudden overthrow of an

\(^{14}\) Larry Diamond, “Transitions to Democracy,” (Lecture, Stanford University, October 24, 2018)

authoritarian regime resulting from popular mobilization or regime ruptures.\textsuperscript{16} In these cases, security forces usually play a key role, turning against the regime or refusing to save it from collapse.

Electoral revolutions, also known as color revolutions, are a form of replacement-based transition. Electoral revolutions occur when a competitive authoritarian regime is ousted as the result of an unexpected electoral defeat. Beatriz Magaloni, Javier Corrales, and Michael McFaul have analyzed domestic and electoral political dynamics in order to predict transitions out of competitive authoritarianism.\textsuperscript{17} McFaul identifies some common features of electoral (color) revolutions by analyzing the democratic revolutions in post-communist Ukraine, Georgia, and Serbia, outlining seven common factors uniting these three countries “as cases of democratic breakthrough.”\textsuperscript{18} These factors are: 1) A competitive authoritarian or semi-autocratic regime; 2) a united and organized political opposition; 3) an unpopular incumbent; 4) enough independent election monitoring and 5) partially independent media to demonstrate electoral fraud; 6) massive non-violent mobilizations, and 7) divisions in the regime’s security forces.\textsuperscript{19} Each of these is a facet of successful electoral revolution.

Venezuela between 2016 and 2017 neared all seven of the factors listed for electoral revolutions. Given our understanding of how authoritarian countries undergo rapid transformations toward democracy, Venezuela should have been a

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} McFaul, “Transitions from Postcommunism,” 6.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
clear example of transition. All the features of successful electoral transitions discussed by other theorists were present, yet Maduro has still managed to hang onto power in Venezuela. This thesis addresses the factors that make the Venezuelan case unique, contributing to the literature on democratic transitions in pseudodemocratic regimes.

**Competing Strategies for Authoritarian Consolidation**

In order to withstand electoral revolution, the Maduro government relied on the regime’s existing foundations for authoritarian consolidation. Political scientist Christian Göbel defines authoritarian consolidation “as a deliberate project of the ruling elite to enhance its capacities to govern society.” According to Göbel’s definition, authoritarian consolidation involves developing capacities to exert one of three types of power: despotic power, infrastructural power, and discursive power. Despotic power is the ability to “coerce one's will on the people,” infrastructural power is innately manifested in the institutions that regulate society, and discursive power is outlined as the ability to manipulate the population into wanting “what the government wants them to want.”

Infrastructural and discursive capacities are often vital to authoritarian consolidation, since they provide an operational framework through which the regime can address social challenges and maintain control without relying solely on violence and intimidation. In Venezuela, the Communal State and the military were key institutions for the regime’s consolidation.

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21 Ibid.
The Communal State is a bottom-up strategy for authoritarian consolidation. It was a central ideological component of Chávez’s “Socialism of the 21st Century” and was ultimately meant to replace the existing liberal democratic state, establishing a communal governance structure. In the late-2000s, community-oriented and overwhelmingly Chavista geopolitical Communal Councils were established; these institutions were building blocks for the Communal State and operated parallel to municipal governments (See Chapter 3). This allowed the central government to develop infrastructural power capabilities, exercising local-level authority even in regions with opposition-controlled governments. This partially developed, alternative state structure was unique to Chavismo’s brand of competitive authoritarianism, and was readily available to the government when their hegemony was threatened by the opposition’s victory in the 2015 National Assembly elections.

The military is another other tool for consolidation utilized by the regime. The military strategy for authoritarian consolidation develops despotic power to pressure the population into obedience. In the wake of a failed military coup in 2002, Chávez’s government restructured the Armed Forces to prevent future revolts against the government (See Chapter 3). For this reason, in spite of discontent and divisions in security forces, the military remained obedient during the 2017 protests. It should be noted here that this thesis operates under the assumption that the overwhelming opposition to the regime, influenced by the complete collapse of Venezuelan society, was also reflected in the Armed Forces, at least among lower ranked officials. The Armed Forces have also become increasingly intertwined with
the ruling party and the state, receiving special privileges in exchange for their allegiance. The military and Communal State strategies for authoritarian consolidation were key to the regime’s survival. These two competing strategies, however, have recently come into conflict, which will be elaborated on in later chapters.

**Methodology**

As Venezuela faces a new political era of single-party dictatorship, the future of the country remains uncertain. It is still unclear how the party will proceed in its consolidation of power and what governmental institutions will remain relevant; will the regime continue its consolidation efforts by means of the Communal State? Studying the evolution of these institutions exposes the political framework available to the Venezuelan government and may reveal paths for redemocratization. In addition, there are far-reaching implications for the literature on democracy and competitive authoritarianism; understanding what makes the Venezuelan case unique allows for the identification of similar strategies in Latin America and around the world that may lead to the erosion of democratic rule.

This thesis is structured chronologically, outlining the development of Venezuelan politics and restructuring of institutions since Hugo Chávez was elected president in 1998. It begins with Chávez’s consolidation of power in 1999 and follows the evolution of authoritarianism in Venezuela until 2017. The gradual reforms implemented during this period have resulted in an autocratic regime that, as of May 2019, has managed to resist democratic forces despite unprecedented government unpopularity and humanitarian crisis. Due to the particular importance
of the Communal State and the military, my analysis of this time period is primarily focused on these two strategies for authoritarian consolidation, as well as the historical events that enabled their development.

**Argument**

This thesis argues that the *Chavista* regime succeeded in thwarting electoral revolution and transitioning to hegemonic authoritarianism using two strategies for authoritarian consolidation: a military strategy and a bottom-up approach. Electoral revolution ultimately failed in Venezuela due to piecemeal authoritarian consolidation, meaning the gradual implementation of autocratic reforms and restructurings in service of *Chavismo*’s political survival. These reforms, when aggregated, provided an authoritarian infrastructure through the military and Communal State that stymied electoral revolution in 2016-2017.

The military and bottom-up strategies for authoritarian consolidation began developing at the turn of the century and evolved over time to protect *Chavismo*’s hegemony. Each chapter of this thesis elucidates important political developments that directly contributed to the evolution of these two consolidation strategies. Chapter II addresses the issues of political legitimacy that allowed Chávez to pursue the two strategies through his 1999 Constitution. It reveals how the *Chavista* regime managed to establish competitive authoritarianism by taking advantage of the former political establishment’s failures. Chapter III analyzes how repeated resistance to Chávez prompted him to insulate his government from future threats by restructuring the military and institutionalizing community-level clientelism. These reforms constituted the initial stages of the military and bottom-up strategies.
Chapter IV addresses how, after Chávez’s death, the Maduro government accelerated the two consolidation strategies by reinforcing military loyalty incentives and controlling society using the Communal State. This reveals why the Armed Forces remained loyal to the regime during the approach to electoral revolution and explains how the government managed to circumvent the opposition-held National Assembly. Finally, Chapter V synthesizes the evolution of the two strategies and explores their development since the transition to hegemonic authoritarianism in 2017.
Chapter II: *Chavismo’s Consolidation of Power*

On February 2, 1999, Hugo Chávez Frías, the Venezuelan presidential candidate that had vowed to permanently end the Republic of Venezuela was sworn in as its president. Standing next to outgoing President Rafael Caldera during the inaugural ceremony, Chávez committed to one last goading act as president elect, deviating from the presidential oath to fit his quintessential “revolutionary” rhetoric:

I swear before God and my people that upon this moribund Constitution I will drive forth the necessary democratic transformations so that the new Republic will have a *magna carta* befitting these new times. I swear it.22

The silence from Venezuela’s perturbed political elite was overshadowed by the thunderous applause of the Chávez-supporting minority in the chamber. Many politicians in the audience of the Federal Legislative Palace wore long faces, but none was more center stage than the despondent expression of President Caldera—who had an embattled relationship with the president elect. Chávez had repeatedly attacked Caldera, who he viewed as part of the corrupt Venezuelan political class. During the ceremony, Chávez did not shake his hand and refused that the outgoing president place the presidential sash on him, as was customary.23 In plain view of the nation, Caldera now found himself in an uncomfortable position, forced to directly face the camera, as Chávez’s presidential oath was broadcasted across the country.

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To make matters worse, Caldera bore some responsibility for the rise of President Hugo Chávez, who was not a traditional presidential candidate. As a lieutenant colonel, Chávez led a failed military coup d’état in 1992 that resulted in his imprisonment, but he was pardoned and released in 1994 by his predecessor—Rafael Caldera. Three years later, Chávez and his supporters founded the Fifth Republic Movement political party (*Movimiento Quinta República*, MVR). It ran on a “revolutionary” platform that promised radical reforms and the fundamental transformation of Venezuelan democracy to end the political hegemony of establishment parties, *Acción Democrática* (AD) and the Social Christian Party (Copei), which had dominated Venezuelan politics since the end of military dictatorship in 1958.

Hours after formally assuming the presidency, Chávez called for a referendum to activate the election of a Constituent National Assembly (*Asamblea Nacional Constituyente*, ANC) tasked with writing a new Constitution for Venezuela. The momentum from his presidential campaign carried over to the movement for the constitutional project, and it soon became clear that a referendum would be held as soon as possible.

However, low voter participation and the overwhelming control held by Chávez and his party produced concern amongst opponents. The political

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25 The process of writing a new Constitution consisted of three steps, each depending on separate electoral processes. First, a referendum deciding whether or not to convene a Constituent Assembly took place in April 1999. Second, elections were held to elect representatives to the ANC. Third, after the ANC finished debating and drafting the constitutional document, it was adopted via popular referendum.
opposition denounced the cursory and exclusionary process through which the new Constitution was drafted, especially since it concentrated significant power in the hands of the president. Despite their arguments, however, the opposition was unsuccessful in convincing Venezuelans to reject the proposed Constitution.

This chapter focuses on the conditions that enabled Chávez to successfully redesign Venezuela’s constitutional framework. This new Constitution was the basis for the regime’s later development of military and bottom-up strategies for authoritarian consolidation. The chapter specifically illustrates how the opposition’s inherent weaknesses allowed the president to mold the Venezuelan political landscape in his favor. Analyzing the political developments before and during Chávez’s rise to power reveals the origins of the competitive authoritarian regime that succeeded in thwarting electoral revolution in 2016-2017.

The establishment of a single-party regime in Venezuela today is the direct result of Chavez’s prolonged hegemony over the government. The 1999 Constitution, in particular, was a major tool for this consolidation. It may be tempting, then, to assume that Chávez managed to surreptitiously concentrate power through the 1999 Constitution—this was not the case. Several sectors of Venezuelan society understood the threat that the proposed document posed to their democracy. In fact, during the campaign to approve the new Constitution, political parties and civil society groups opposing its adoption vehemently denounced the concentration of power under the Executive Branch. Still, despite these groups’ endeavors to convince Venezuelans to vote against the Constitution, their efforts were ultimately unsuccessful in counteracting Chávez’s populist appeal.
The massive cultural and political capital that Chávez had amassed as a presidential candidate overwhelmed his opposition and forced them to fit his narrative. Even the scholarship on the president’s rise to power has fallen victim to Chávez. As a result, the historical literature on Chávez largely focuses on him as a populist beacon for disenfranchised Venezuelans instead of his dialogue with other contemporary political forces.

Analyzing Chávez in dialogue with his non-populist counterparts during the lead up to the 1999 constitutional referendum helps us understand the conditions that led Venezuela towards competitive authoritarianism. This analysis of the Venezuelan case highlights two major conditions. Public disaffection toward political elites had reached levels that rendered their political legitimacy unsalvageable, setting the stage for Chavez’s populism to take root; in addition, Chávez’s monopoly on national identity and civic mindedness inhibited opposition efforts to prevent his concentration of power.

*The Delegitimization of Punto Fijo Politics*

Legitimacy is “a broadly shared perception that certain social arrangements are just;” it plays a central role in the stability of both the state, civil society, and political parties.26 Therefore, in order to constitute a loss in legitimacy, general perception must shift against the existing political order. In the Venezuelan context, the social mobilization produced by Chávez’s movement exceeded the capacity of political institutions, leaving the state, civil society, and political parties unable to adapt quickly enough to accommodate societal demands. The loss of legitimacy

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resulting from this institutional breakdown led to the decay, and virtual collapse, of the established political parties, as well as the existing state.27

The Punto Fijo Pact played a major role in the depleted legitimacy of the pre-Chávez political order. The pact, signed by the main Venezuelan parties at the end of dictatorship in 1958, ensured stability and established a new political order. However, Acción Democrática (AD) and the Social Christian Party (Copei) soon came to dominate the new political system, monopolizing power between them and instituting systems of patronage.28

After its establishment, the Punto Fijo political system crystalized into a partyarchy, where the state, dominated by AD and Copei, was not sufficiently receptive to citizen demands. Lisa Peattie’s 1968 political ethnography of La Laja, a low-class neighborhood in the environs of the industrial city of Ciudad Guayana, illustrates the extent to which party apparatuses had permeated state functions. “State institutions […] established a presence in La Laja but they arrived on the coattails of AD’s local machinery.”29 AD’s influence permeated almost all state, party, and communal institutions in La Laja. This state-society relationship was replicated across other low-income communities, such that “the state’s presence was highly visible, but the state’s effectiveness at probing into society hinged on the organizational infrastructure provided by either AD or Copei.”30

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27 This idea is derived from Samuel Huntington’s claims on the connection between rapid social mobilization and political decay in *Political Order in Changing Societies* (1968).
30 Ibid, 73.
The parties’ central role in the local level administration of resources and competencies resulted in a highly unrepresentative state infrastructure that was ultimately unresponsive to the local community. The party-managed patronage system meant “individuals or organizations had virtually no hope of being heard unless they utilized party networks and followed party guidelines.” In 1990, Revista SIC, a Venezuelan magazine that publishes analytical articles on economic, political, and social issues, elaborated on the direct relationship between the party’s infiltration of state functions and bad governance.

The parties became entrenched, becoming "machineries" of population control and [backdoor] agreements, rather than channels of representation and popular participation or designers and implementers of alternative political projects amenable to the conditions of Venezuelan society. AD and Copei were so deeply intertwined with the state that the collapse of the parties’ legitimacy also severely affected the legitimacy of the state itself.

Deteriorating socioeconomic conditions ultimately shifted general perception decisively against the parties and the state. In the last two decades of the twentieth century, poverty and inequality exploded in Venezuela. From 1979 to 1997, the average annual income dropped from $5,345 to $3,049 (adjusted to USD) and, as more Venezuelans fell into poverty, the wealth gap widened. In 1980, only 18 percent of Venezuelan households lived in poverty, while 9 percent lived in

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32 “El yugo que no hemos lanzado,” Revista SIC (Centro Gumilla, March 1990), Venezuela Subject Collection, Box 1, Folder 3, Hoover Institution Archives.
33 López Maya, Del viernes negro, 39.
extreme poverty. By 1997, however, the year before Chávez was elected president, the proportion of households living in poverty and extreme poverty had respectively inflated to 48 and 28 percent. These growing socioeconomic imbalances continued to fuel discontent throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

Tensions came to a head on February 27, 1989 when a string of riots and protests ignited across the country for five consecutive days, an event known as the “Caracazo.” The Caracazo served as the coup de grâce for the flawed Punto Fijo system, dissolving the last remnants of the political system’s legitimacy in the following years. President Carlos Andres Pérez’s neoliberal economic reforms eliminated gas subsidies, causing a 100 percent increase in gas prices and a subsequent 30 percent increase in public transport costs, sparking the protests against the government. Armed groups faced off with the military in impoverished neighborhoods, but soldiers were not well trained and confrontations often ended in the indiscriminate killing of innocent people in their homes. Political scientist Margarita López Maya describes the first two nights of March 1989 as “a nightmare for the poorest sectors of Caracas: raided homes, shootings in some neighborhoods, and the appearance of dead bodies on the street at the end of the curfew are among the stories told.” The magnitude of the protests was unprecedented in contemporary Venezuelan political history and was matched by brutal, indiscriminate repression, which exacerbated public disaffection.

34 Ibid, 38.
35 Ibid.
36 “El yugo que no hemos lanzado,” 67.
37 López Maya, Del viernes negro, 80.
Exploitation of Weakened Legitimacy

Hugo Chávez’s leftist populism rose at the opportune moment, offering an unquestionable and radical alternative. The previously cited 1990 Revista SIC article describes how, in the year after the Caracazo, “popular protest [was] constant.” It goes on to explain that this was “not only due to day-to-day malaise and deteriorated living conditions” of the population, but also because “those who [considered] themselves leaders and rulers of society [had] lost the sensibility to listen to the people and [didn’t] have the habit of doing so.” Chávez’s 1992 coup was an attempt to end this dysfunctional political arrangement, and his campaign in 1998 had the same mission. So, while political elites failed to respond in the aftermath of the Caracazo, Venezuelans saw Chávez taking concrete actions to dismantle the corrupt political system. As a result, the coup’s charismatic protagonist began captivating the attention of Venezuela’s disenfranchised years before running for office.

In 1999, AD and Copei’s history as part of Venezuela’s party-dominated democracy depleted their legitimacy, rendering them virtually powerless as political forces against Chávez’s proposed Constitution. President Chávez actively exploited the establishment parties’ past to further undermine the legitimacy of opposition arguments and strengthen his own. On 29 November 1999, Chávez gave a speech defending the new Constitution that included several fiery attacks on opponents, calling them “degenerates” and part of a “rancid oligarchy.” In these attacks, Chávez grouped corrupt politicians, media elites, businessmen and church leaders together,

38 “El yugo que no hemos lanzado,” Revista Sic (Centro Gumilla, March 1990), Venezuela Subject Collection, Box 1, Folder 3, Hoover Institution Archives.
accusing them of conspiring against the Constitution and “belonging to [the] rancid oligarchy whose only motherland is capital and profits.” Chaívez went on to say that he and his supporters were in fact “saving Venezuela” from “the degenerate traditional political parties and their cronies.”

Chaívez used these attacks to actively link all opposition to the Constitution with the political forces of the Punto Fijo political regime. This associated opponents’ arguments with the unpopularity and depleted legitimacy of AD and Copei despite the fact that the media, businesses, and the church were in fact independent entities. In the same speech, Chaívez elaborates that his opponents “aren’t pained in the least by misery, by the children, by the old folks, by hunger, by death, none of that hurts them.” Again, this characterization of the opposition as callous and inhuman is rooted in the decayed state-society relations, economic destitution, and brutal repression that the majority of Venezuelans experienced during the final decades of the twentieth century.

In his rhetoric, Chaívez legitimized his movement as the moral alternative to this corrupt and heartless elite. The new Constitution also represented the wholesale overhaul of the system that Chaívez had campaigned on during his presidential election. In a 1998 interview, former-president Carlos Andres Perez explained that Venezuelans “have a right to be angry and frustrated. There is a feeling that there’s nothing to lose and that someone must punish the traditional powerbrokers.” Perez followed up his statement by clarifying that voters weren’t

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“looking for a presidential candidate. They [were] looking for an avenger,” and Hugo Chávez was just that.

Chávez also portrayed himself as the embodiment of “the people’s will,” evidenced by his notorious phrase “I am not an individual—I am the people.” He used his charismatic authority to juxtapose his popular but unsustainable economic policies with the political elite he repeatedly attacked. A 1998 New York Times article also recognized his bond with “the people” alongside economic policy concerns: "While Mr. Chavez gives voice—and a roaring one at that—to Venezuela’s downtrodden, some fear that populist economic policies will set the clock back." Over time, though, Chávez used his claim to “the people’s will” as justification for the 1999 Constitution, which undermined means of government accountability.

Where, then, did Chávez’s legitimacy and resounding popularity derive from? The failed coup d’état he led in 1992. A Houston Chronicle headline from March 8, 1992 reads “Despite failure, coup leader a hero in Venezuela.” The front page includes a picture of a two-year-old girl, Yocoima Herrera, dressed in military garb, sporting “a red beret and speckled fatigues with ‘Chávez’ inscribed above the right breast pocket,” emulating coup-conspirator Chávez’s paratrooper attire. Another photograph shows graffiti on the streets of Caracas that reads “Viva El Comandante

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43 Ralph Schusler, "Despite failure, coup leader a hero in Venezuela," *Houston Chronicle* (March 8 1992), E.B. Brossard Papers, Box 33, Folder 7, Hoover Institution Archives.
Chávez.” The rebel leader had undergone an apotheosis overnight, becoming a folk hero to the Venezuelan popular classes. Therefore, while Chávez’s legitimacy as a political figure did stem from his nationalist fervor and humble origins, the 1992 coup attempt ultimately cemented him into the hearts and minds of millions of Venezuelans years before he ran for office.

Still, in spite of his resonance with the average Venezuelan, the fact that Chávez had gone to prison for organizing a coup attempt should have called into question his democratic nature. Although “Chávez’s democratic credentials [were] suspect in many circles,” his emphasis on democracy and revamped image, from military putschist to presidential candidate, helped strengthen his legitimacy. He exchanged his military attire for a new style becoming of a presidential candidate: a shirt and vest for campaign stops, and a suit made by renowned Venezuelan-Lusitanian tailor Clement for elegant occasions.

Additionally, Chávez’s apparent commitment to democratic ideals and use of democratic channels dovetailed effortlessly with his criticisms of the Punto Fijo system’s faux democracy. In a 1998 interview, Peruvian journalist Jaime Bayly asks then-candidate Chávez, “are you sure you’re not going to be an authoritarian president, like a new Pinochet or Fujimori?” To which Chávez responds with a chuckle, inviting Bayly to Miraflores for a few months so “he can see what a real democrat—a man dedicated to humanity and equality—is like.” Chávez continues, “I am seriously inviting you. I am dedicated to not being authoritarian, [Venezuelans]...
don't want any more authoritarianism.”

Therefore, the undemocratic character of Venezuela’s old political regime severely damaged the legitimacy of Chávez’s opponents and simultaneously buttressed his own. Their lack of legitimacy vis-à-vis Chávez’s savior-like image meant that the opposition was unable to convincingly denounce the process of the constitutional project as undemocratic. Opponents would have to find new strategies to convince Venezuelans to reject the 1999 Constitution, such as appealing to their national identity instead. As it turns out, Chávez had already cornered that market as well.

*Monopoly on National Identity*

From the beginning, symbols of cultural nationalism were at the center of Chávez’s rhetoric and ideology. These are symbols that represent the best aspects of society and are often deeply intertwined with national identity. The icons of “baseball, hotdogs, and apple pie” serve as an example of these in American culture. In the Venezuelan context, similar symbols of cultural nationalism exist: God, *el pueblo*, and Simón Bolívar. In his closing campaign speech, candidate Chávez implements all three in tandem, “before all else, we must give thanks to God. […] We Venezuelans of good faith must elevate our prayer so that our God continues to […] illuminate the path towards vindication, morality, and the dignity of *el pueblo*

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48 These symbols were popularized by the 1970s television jingle for Chevrolet, “Baseball, Hot Dogs, Apple Pie and Chevrolet, They Go Together in the Good ’Ole USA”.
49 Translates to “the people” but has stronger nationalist connotation.
of Simón Bolívar.” Rhetorical use of God, *el pueblo* and Simón Bolívar was a hallmark of Chávez’s campaigns.

Chávez’s ideological commitment to *Bolivarismo*, in particular, was vital to his monopolization of national identity. Simón Bolívar is a figure in Venezuelan political history with a national significance akin to that of George Washington in the United States. Bolívar achieved independence for Venezuela and is colloquially referred to as “The Liberator.” Every Venezuelan city and town has a square or landmark named after him, and portraits of Bolívar are found in virtually every school and government office across the country. Chávez admired Simón Bolívar and compared his “revolution” to Bolívar’s revolution against the Spanish. In fact, Chávez’s Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement-200 (MRB-200), which organized the 1992 coup and predated the creation of MVR, was named after independence leader. Chávez founded the MRB-200 in 1982 within the ranks of the Venezuelan military. As Chávez explained in a speech at the University of Havana in 1994, the officers “had the audacity to found a movement within the ranks of the Venezuelan Army. We were tired of the corruption, and we swore to dedicate our lives to the creation of a revolutionary movement and to the revolutionary struggle in Venezuela, straight away, within Latin America. We started doing this the year of the bicentenary of the birth of Bolívar.” It was clear that Chávez’s revolutionary rhetoric and politics had deep ideological roots in the legacy of Simón Bolívar.

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51 The movement was forced to change its name due to a law prohibiting the use of Bolívar’s name in any political party or entity.
52 This is where the suffix “200” in MBR-200 derives from.
53 Hugo Chávez, “Discurso de Hugo Chávez en la Habana” (Speech, Havana, Cuba, December 14, 1994).
Chávez’s zealous devotion to Bolívar’s legacy allowed him to appropriate The Liberator as a symbol for his political movement, to the extent that Bolivarismo was synonymous with Chavismo. In essence, Chávez’s Bolivarismo “is a mix of Pan-American, socialist, and democratic ideals fixed against the injustices of imperialism, inequality, and corruption so common” in Latin American countries.\(^{54}\) The national-patriotic emphasis on equality and democracy combined with the rejection of imperialism and corruption made Bolivarismo instantly popular. For this reason, Chávez made an effort of identifying key places and processes he supported as “Bolivarian,” inextricably linking them to his political movement. At his final campaign stop in Caracas, speaking to a massive mobilization of supporters, Chávez exclaimed, “what we are seeing here today, in this Bolivarian Caracas, has never been seen before in this century.”\(^{55}\) The term “Bolivarian Caracas” to refer to the capital city sounds awkward, even in the original Spanish. Still, due to Chávez’s co-opting of the “Bolivarian” descriptor, the term in this context politicizes Caracas and asserts that the capital city is Chávez-supporting.

In the public discourse, Chávez consistently portrayed his constituent process as intrinsically “Bolivarian.” In his first independence day speech as president, on July 5\(^{th}\) 1999, Chávez highlighted parallels between Bolívar’s historic constitutional project and his own:

> Fortunately, today, in the midst of the constituent process, we are twenty days away from a day that will be historic for Venezuela, we are twenty days away from the free, open and democratic elections of a National Constituent Assembly, which will be neither more nor less,  

the instrument of a collective to make a true revolution to make way for a new free and democratic republic, a vigorous republic. [...] As Bolívar said in Angostura: “The most perfect form of government must be the one that provides its people with the greatest amount of social stability, the greatest amount of political stability and the greatest amount of happiness possible.”  

This allusion to Bolívar’s Angostura address politicizes The Liberator’s legacy, directly linking it to the 1999 Constituent Assembly. Repeating this strategy throughout his campaigns, Chávez successfully appropriated Bolívar’s image, strengthening the legitimacy of his political movement by using the nationalist pride that Bolívar evoked. In addition, this Bolivar-laced rhetoric promises to overcome deficiencies inherent in the prior political system, which again illustrates Chávez’s exploitation of the previous regime’s illegitimacy.  

Bolivarismo also served as a smokescreen for Chávez’s authoritarian tendencies and complete control over the constituent process. For example, during the 1999 Constituent Assembly’s first session, Chávez proposed the first draft of the “Bolivarian Constitution,” which included an article renaming the country to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. The ANC, which was overwhelmingly composed of MVR Chávez supporters, initially rejected the new name, but the measure was reconsidered after Chávez insisted that it be included. This action evidenced the authoritarian character of Chávez’s presidency and directly contradicted the president’s previous statements reaffirming the sovereignty of the ANC; at the 1999 inauguration of the reelected governor of Aragua he stated: “Who knows if the

57 Bolívar’s address at the Congress of Angostura during the Colombian and Venezuelan wars for independence is a widely read work of Latin American political history.
Constituent [Assembly] will fire me. Nobody knows. If it's the will of the majority, I will leave."\(^{59}\) Bolívar's importance in Venezuelan national identity, however, made it difficult to argue against reforms that carried his name, which allowed Chávez to justify his actions behind the façade of Bolivarismo. In addition to revealing the president's strongman tendencies, though, the country's renaming signified something much more serious—Chávez's wholesale claim to Venezuelan national identity.

In addition to the appropriation of Bolívar and other cultural symbols, Chávez's personal image was also deeply entwined with Venezuelan national identity. Even as he began wearing Western attire during his first presidential campaign, he remained committed to the tradition Venezuelan clothing, like the liqui-liqui, the national costume for men. On the campaign trail he reaffirms that "there is no transmutation from the liqui-liqui to [Western attire]. [...] It's simply the man and his circumstances." \(^{60}\) The president also demonstrated impressive knowledge of Venezuelan culture, history, and society, casually using regional colloquial expressions and allusions to the Venezuelan literary canon in his speech. For example, in a 2006 speech attacking U.S. President Bush, Chávez calls Bush "Mr. Danger" and uses the expression "te metiste conmigo, pajarito."\(^{61}\) The phrase, which loosely translates to "you messed with me, little birdy," is an obscure expression that is unquestionably part of the Venezuelan vernacular. In addition, "Mr. Danger" is the American villain in the celebrated Venezuelan novel Doña Barbara. This adroit

\(^{59}\) Evert Garcia, "Chávez: 'Gobernaré por 10 años o 1 si el pueblo así lo quiere';" El Nacional (January 24, 1999), E.B. Brossard Papers, Box 29, Folder 2, Hoover Institution Archives.

\(^{60}\) Marcano and Barrera Tyszka, Hugo Chávez sin uniforme, 182-183.

use of Venezuelan culture, evidenced in Chávez’s allusions and speech, distinguished him as distinctly Venezuelan. As a result, in the eyes of many, Chávez embodied Venezuela and, in turn, Venezuela itself was conflated with Chavismo.

Chávez’s monopolization of national identity granted him political capital, strengthening his attacks on the opposition to exclude them from the Venezuelan identity, often calling them traitors to the country. Such was the case that a civil society organization felt it important to clarify in their publication against the 1999 Constitution: “We do not represent petty partisan or sectorial interests and we refuse to be labeled as corrupt or traitors to the Motherland.” Thus, the opposition’s lack of legitimacy, coupled with Chávez’s monopoly on national identity, meant that opponents to the 1999 Constitution would have to resort to arguments that catered to Venezuelans’ civic mindedness. This was a losing strategy for an opposition with no political capital, but it was the only viable option.

**Appeals to Civic Mindedness**

The moral focus of Chávez’s constitutional project made it difficult for opposition arguments based in civic mindedness to take root. *Understanding my Constitutional Rights*, an educational board game distributed by ANC’s Commission for Citizen Participation in 1999, illustrates Chavismo’s emphasis on moral questions during the constituent process. The game’s design is similar to dominos and requires players to match scenarios featuring cartoon characters with the corresponding rights and articles of the Constitution. For example, the side of the card showing a man putting a ballot in a box with the text “you elect your candidates

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62 “Venezuela dice NO: 6 razones para el NO,” *Así No* (1999), Venezuela Subject Collection, Box 1, Folder 6, Hoover Institution Archives.
by voting” corresponds to the side of another card that reads “Right to Vote, Articles: 5° and 63°.” The game’s selective focus on the unassailable universal rights enshrined in the Constitution, however, ultimately means that it serves as a piece of propaganda in favor of the constitutional project, especially since these are not the elements of the proposed document that caused controversy. Additionally, the back of the instruction pamphlet reads, “For the defense of these rights, VOTE YES!” which indicates a clear political bias.

This board game represented a key innovation in the practice of Venezuelan politics, where the government became actively involved in efforts to engage the people. Even before the Constitution’s approval vote, it seemed like Chávez was keeping his promise to create an accessible, open democracy. Similar citizen outreach efforts became a centerpiece of Chávez’s later governments, which printed articles of the Constitution on rice packages and other products, to inform everyday citizens of their rights. The novelty of this innovation conveyed genuine interest in the Venezuelan people and was unprecedented in the country’s political history.

The opposition did not fare well against Chávez’s rights-centered campaign. While the groups against the Constitution actually opposed the concentration of power under the Executive, it was relatively easy for Chávez to instead portray them as being against basic universal rights. “The Two Faces of the Constitutional Project,” an article published by Así No, a civil society group against the Constitution, attempts to inform the public on this strategy:

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63 “Conociendo mis derechos constitucionales: Juego Educativo,” Comisión de Participación Ciudadana de la Asamblea Nacional Constituyente (1999), Venezuela Subject Collection, Box 1, Folder 6, Hoover Institution Archives.
No sensible person can oppose that our magna carta should incorporate these rights. They make explicit the values that we want to respect and prioritize as a society. [...] On the other hand, the Constitutional Project revives the populism that promises more than what the government can accomplish and the centralism that distances power from communities. The recession of these is so great that it would prove simply impossible to achieve the rights that would be consecrated in the new Constitution. Therefore, all that is promised is a new “candy” that is given to the people, who still maintain hope in better governance.64

This argument is logical, but it relies heavily on knowledge regarding the importance of institutions and division of power. It also conveys that the basic rights promised, which the authors recognize are important, are not attainable. As a result, Así No does not present Venezuelans that have lost faith in the old political order with any viable alternatives, instead reinforcing the claim that the opposition does not consider fundamental rights a priority.

The president’s humble roots also helped him leverage basic rights in support of the Constitution. Chávez was born in the small town of Sabaneta in Barinas State, where his grandmother raised him in an impoverished household. In 1999, Steve Gutkin of The Associated Press notes Chávez’s ability to energize “the poor masses who [had] flocked to” him.65 This ties back to the disparities in legitimacy between Chávez and his opponents. Since impoverished Venezuelans were able to empathize with Chávez and widely distrusted the traditional political elite, it was almost impossible for the opposition to establish the level of trust necessary to convince the poor with technical arguments grounded in civic mindedness.

64 “Venezuela dice NO,” Así No, Hoover Institution Archives.
Another issue with the civic-minded argument was that Chávez appeared passionately committed to democratic ideals. In an interview with Mexican journalist Jorge Ramos, Chávez confidently dismisses the suggestion that he won’t give up power after his presidential term ends:

Of course I’m willing to give up power after five years, and I’ve said that maybe even before five years, because we are going to propose a constitutional reform—a transformation of the political system to have a real, much more authentic democracy. If, for example, after two years it turns out that I am a fiasco, a failure, or I commit a crime, or an act of corruption, or something that justifies my leaving power before the five years are up, I’d be more than willing to do so.66

This commitment to the democratic will of the people was a repeated theme, in a January 1999 speech Chávez affirms, “I will govern for ten years, or one year, if that is what the people want.”67 Chávez consistently portrayed himself as being at the mercy of the people’s will, which helped counter the narrative of Chávez as an aspiring authoritarian. Additionally, the AD and Copei parties had spent years subverting democratic institutions at the expense of the people, such that arguments concerning the democratic nature of new Constitution appeared hypocritical and tone-deaf.

Enthusiastic participation by non-traditional political groups in the Constituent Assembly elections also debilitated the overall influence of opposition arguments. One of these was Primero Justicia, which later became an opposition party in the 2000s. A propaganda pamphlet for Primero Justicia advertises Julio Borges and Leopoldo López as candidates for the ANC. Both are widely known opposition leaders in Venezuela today; López is a political prisoner and Borges is in

67 Garcia, “Gobernaré por 10 años,” Hoover Institution Archives.
exile. The back of the pamphlet lists some of *Primero Justicia*’s proposals for the new Constitution: “To establish an efficient and accessible justice system that grantees equal treatment under the law. To establish conditions promoting a stable and productive economy where employment is a priority. To promote a truly participative democracy where citizens have a voice and vote on the prioritization, supervision and execution of social investment and public services.” All three of these proposals reflect those promoted by Chávez’s movement; in fact, Chávez popularized the phrase “participative democracy.” Chávez’s rhetoric had seeped into the opposition’s language, exhibiting the extent to which Chávez dominated the political narrative. This reinforcement of *Chavista* ideals and the participation of opposition parties such as AD, Copei, and *Primero Justicia* in the Constituent Assembly ultimately helped legitimatize the drafted Constitution and undermined later arguments against its contents.

Also, the fact that Chávez was an “entertaining president” should not be underplayed. As political scientist Michael McCarthy generalizes, “Venezuelans self-identify as informal folks prone to jest about even the most serious subjects. This lighthearted informality is a trademark idiosyncrasy.” An unintended consequence of this was the jocular trivialization of otherwise serious threats to democratic rule. A 1999 Reuters article reports on the “comedy boom” inspired by Chávez’s presidency, including the “La Reconstituyente” (“The Reconstituent”), a three-hour long satirical show named after his flagship Constituent Project. The show “poked

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68 “Primero Justicia para la Constituyente,” *Asociación Civil Primero Justicia* (1999), Venezuela Subject Collection, Box 1, Folder 6, Hoover Institution Archives.
fun at [Chávez’s] alleged authoritarian tendencies, vague economic policies and rambling news conferences, the actors hit a nerve and [produced] cathartic relief for the audience, [playing] on the fears of the mostly middle and upper class minority who [opposed] Chávez or at least [doubted] his intentions.”70 This comedic take was in line with Venezuelan culture, but also reduced the likelihood of a more serious reaction from detractors.

In addition, Chávez himself was “informal” and “prone to jest,” which fed into his charisma and further undermined the seriousness of the opposition’s tone. The Reuters article adds that “most of Chávez’s cabinet [had] been to see the show and laughed along with the rest of the crowd, [and] Chávez [had] promised to come too.” 71 The administration’s openness to ridicule and teasing downplayed accusations of authoritarian tendencies by honoring the right to freedom of speech.

Therefore, unable to compete with the president’s legitimacy and monopoly on national identity, the opposition attempted to cater to Venezuelans’ civic mindedness. However, Chávez’s focus on the rights enshrined in the Constitution, the opposition’s participation in the constituent process and their inability to produce viable alternatives led to the strategy’s failure. Additionally, Venezuelan society's informal jest affected the perceived seriousness of Chávez’s consolidation of power and dismantling of institutions, which only made the success of civic-minded arguments more improbable.

70 Paul Hughes, “Venezuelan president inspires comedy boom,” Reuters (June 10, 1999), E.B. Brossard Papers, Box 28, Folder 3, Hoover Institution Archives.
71 Ibid.
The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela

In December 1999, 71 percent of voters approved the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, setting the stage for a gradual progression toward authoritarian rule.\textsuperscript{72} The resulting decay of Venezuelan democracy worsened throughout Chávez’s presidency and has continued beyond his death in 2013. Chávez held overwhelming influence over the draft and implementation of the 1999 Constitution. As a result, the Constitution became the foundation for the establishment of competitive authoritarianism in Venezuela. Once adopted, Chávez was able to use his newfound influence over the state to subvert democracy and create insurmountable obstacles for the opposition during electoral contestations.

The lead up to the 1999 Constitution is a story of underestimations and miscalculations by traditional political forces. The Venezuelan political establishment initially dismissed Chávez and MVR candidates and was stunned when the party won a plurality in both the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies during the 1998 parliamentary election.\textsuperscript{73}\textsuperscript{74} They were shocked again when Chávez won his presidential election by a comfortable margin of more than one million votes, carrying 17 of the country’s 23 states despite last-ditch efforts by the other parties to pool their support against the populist.\textsuperscript{75} Their dying legitimacy continuously fed Chávez’s movement and allowed him to monopolize Venezuelan national identity and civic mindedness. Additionally, Chávez controlled the political

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\textsuperscript{72} Dieter Nohlen, \textit{Elections in the Americas: A data handbook} (2005), 567.
\textsuperscript{73} MVR beat out Copei and came second to AD in total number of seats obtained.
\textsuperscript{74} López Maya, \textit{Del viernes negro}, 223-225.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 242-243.
\end{flushleft}
narrative, such that the opposition was forced to play by his rules during the constitutional process.

Chávez’s was a slow-moving revolution that the political elite was powerless to stop, despite multiple attempts. At the time, it was difficult to imagine that Chávez would have been so successful in transforming his soft, cultural power into hard, institutional power. In an interview that has not aged particularly well, former Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez commented, “I do not see Chávez lasting very long. I believe that the turmoil [Venezuela] is in will last two years, then Venezuela will begin to rise, but without Chavez at its head.” The continued lack of foresight among political elites was a major factor in Chávez’s success.

**Conclusions**

Framing the established theories on Chávez’s rise to power in a narrative context allows us to better understand these events in dialogue with other political forces. The decay of the political system’s legitimacy to irreparable levels is what ultimately gave Chávez’s populism an enduring foothold in Venezuela. The promise for radical change led to unparalleled influence over national identity and civic mindedness, rendering the opposition uncompetitive as an alternative political force. Therefore, legitimacy and disaffection were at the root of Chávez’s consolidation of power. If previous governments had committed to fundamentally reforming the Venezuelan political system before Chávez, his narrative and rhetoric would have been less compelling. As a result, the opposition would have encountered fewer obstacles when arguing against his 1999 Constitution and could

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have potentially averted Chávez’s consolidation of power.

This chapter has outlined how Chávez managed to establish the foundations for competitive authoritarianism shortly after being elected president. It also reveals the origins of the 1999 constitutional framework that would later be used to pursue the military and bottom-up strategies for authoritarian consolidation. The next chapter elaborates on how Chavismo used the institutional advantages embodied in the 1999 Constitution to maintain its political hegemony by restructuring the military and institutionalizing clientelistic networks.
Chapter III: Institutions Under Competitive Authoritarianism

In order to understand the strategies the Venezuelan regime relied on to resist democratic transition between 2016 and 2017, we must also examine the institutions that evolved during the period of competitive authoritarianism (1999-2015). During the early 2000s, Venezuela experienced continuous sociopolitical turmoil as the sectors opposing Chávez intensified their efforts. This instability polarized society and radicalized Chavista ideology. Throughout this period, several of the factors that predict successful electoral revolution were significantly weakened, including freedom of the press and election monitoring capabilities. Most importantly, however, the Armed Forces were restructured and a new form of local-level governance was introduced, laying the foundation for the Communal State.

This chapter analyzes the birth of the Chavista regime’s military and bottom-up strategies for authoritarian consolidation. Specifically, it examines how continued opposition to Chávez’s government led the regime to protect its hegemony by reorganizing the military and institutionalizing community-level clientelism. These consolidation methods provided the infrastructural basis for the regime’s political survival when faced with electoral revolution in 2016-2017.

The promulgation of the 1999 Constitution meant most state institutions and government positions had to be reelected in accordance with the new magna carta. December of 2000 marked the end of an intense 25-month period of these successive electoral processes. During this timespan, Venezuela held two presidential elections, two governorship elections, two parliamentary elections, two regional legislative elections, mayoral elections and local elections—as well as the
National Constituent Assembly election and three different referendums.\textsuperscript{77} This electoral period replaced traditional elites across the various levels of government with emerging forces aligned with Chávez’s political project. Additionally, \textit{Chavismo} won a comfortable majority in the new unicameral National Assembly, increasing its representation to a 64 percent majority of the seats in the Congress.\textsuperscript{78} The new political map at the end of 2000 reflected significant policy-making power for \textit{Chavismo} at multiple levels of governance, which opened the door for Chávez to implement his political vision for the country.

\textit{Chavismo}’s newfound hegemony resulted in almost immediate backlash by opposition forces, fragmenting Venezuelan society into two antagonistic political camps with diverging visions for the country’s future. Venezuelan historian Margarita López Maya categorizes December 2001 to early 2004 as an “insurrectional period,” where social and political opponents of Chávez resorted to “strategies of insurrectional nature” focused on forcing the president from power as quickly as possible.\textsuperscript{79} The most consequential events during this period were a short-lived 2002 military coup that briefly removed Chávez from power and a national strike between 2002 and 2003. These events are worth elaborating on, as they led to profound changes in the Armed Forces and the continued consolidation of competitive authoritarianism.

\textsuperscript{77} López Maya, \textit{El viernes negro}, 247.
\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Chavismo} won 36 percent seats in the Chamber of Deputies and 34 percent in the Senate during the 1998 parliamentary elections.
\textsuperscript{79} Margarita López Maya, “Exposición con motivo del reconocimiento de la ratificación del Presidente,” (Speech, Caracas, Venezuela, August 15, 2004), Voltairenet.
Chávez’s changes to established institutions and authoritarian leanings led to strong resistance from the country’s most prominent political, labour, and business groups, most notably the Venezuelan Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Production (Federación de Cámaras y Asociaciones de Comercio y Producción de Venezuela, Fedecámaras) and the Confederation of Workers of Venezuela (Confederación de Trabajadores de Venezuela, CTV). The opposition of these groups to a series of executive orders in 2001 prompted Chávez to label them “enemies of the Bolivarian Revolution.”

The antagonistic rhetoric on both sides led to a polarizing battle for legitimacy that locked supporters and opponents of Chávez in an intense political struggle conducive to extreme actions. This polarization of Venezuelan society eventually gave way to all-or-nothing strategies to remove Chávez that repeatedly failed, starting with the 2002 military coup that aided Chavismo’s concentration of institutional power.

Restructuring the Armed Forces

In April 2002, an economic recession and sociopolitical instability intensified opposition to Chávez, leading the CTV and Fedecámaras to call for an indefinite national strike on April 10. The next day roughly 600,000 opposition protestors marched to the Miraflores Presidential Palace, where violent clashes broke out with government supporters. Shortly after, a group of generals executed a coup d’état and detained Chávez. They justified their actions in a televised broadcast announcing that “the Constitution obliges [them] to avoid more bloodshed and that

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81 Ibid.
said obligation is met through the peaceful departure of the president.”

Pedro Carmona, president of Fedecámaras at the time, became *de facto* president and announced the dissolution of the National Assembly and Supreme Court (*Tribunal Supremo de Justicia*), as well as the suspension of the elected governors and mayors. Carmona’s presidency, however, lasted merely 48 hours, after which Chávez was reinstated as president.

The coup ultimately failed due to a combination of factors, including the new government’s decision to suspend constitutional order, resistance to the coup within the Armed Forces, and mass mobilization of Chávez supporters demanding the president’s return. It was primarily led by certain military and business sectors, with limited support from political parties, the media, and the Catholic Church.

However, Carmona’s announcement annulling the 1999 Constitution, which had been legitimately approved via referendum, led to fatal contradictions among those that initially supported the coup, alienating more moderate opponents to Chávez. The Confederation of Workers of Venezuela (CTV) had not been consulted and the trade-union federation’s leader, Carlos Ortega, condemned the new government’s declaration “an attack on the rights and freedom of the worker’s movement.”

Meanwhile masses of protesters demanding Chávez’s return took to the streets, prompting sectors of the Armed Forces to reiterate their loyalty to the president and

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challenge the authority of Carmona’s government. Within 48 hours, the collective military and popular pressure led to Chávez’s restoration.

The coup attempt led to a paradigm shift in Chávez’s relationship to the Armed Forces. Since its independence, Venezuela’s military has never participated in an international conflict. Instead, its dominant mission has been territorial control and internal security, and the Armed Forces played a significant role in the country’s administration and domestic policy—military dictatorships ruled Venezuela until the mid-twentieth century. Partial civilian control over the military only began to develop after the transition to democracy in 1958. In 1999, Chávez launched Plan Bolívar 2000, which involved sending 40,000 soldiers into low-income communities to fight poverty, increase access to education, improve public health, and more. In a 2002 interview with sociologist Marta Harnecker, Chávez commented that Plan Bolívar 2000 aimed to vindicate the Armed Forces 10 years after the Caracazo: “Ten years ago we came out to massacre the people, now we are going to fill them with love. Go and comb the terrain, look for misery. The enemy is death. We are going to fill them with bursts of life instead of gun shots of death.”

The expansion of the military into development and social programs was a key tenant of Chávez’s original vision for Venezuela, which included soldiers playing a direct role in addressing the problems facing the Venezuelan people.

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85 Harold Trinkunas, “Venezuelan Civil-Military Relations: from Chávez to Maduro and Beyond,” (Lecture, Stanford University, March 2, 2019).
86 “Hace 19 años inició la Revolución Bolivariana,” Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Comunicación e Información, February 27, 2018.
The 2002 coup, however, critically damaged Chávez’s trust in the Armed Forces, prompting him to restructure the institution. Harold Trinkunas outlines two important outcomes of the military reforms enacted after the coup attempt: increased “coup-proofing” and ideologization.\textsuperscript{88} “Coup-proofing” refers to structural changes that insulate the government from uprisings by inhibiting the Armed Forces from cohesively organizing against the government. The power of volatile street protests became evident in April 2002: opposition protesters initially served as a catalyst for the coup, while pressure from pro-Chávez protesters played a vital role in restoring the government. This realization led to reforms that weaponized popular pressure in favor of the government while simultaneously uprooting the threat of opposition-led mobilizations. The result was the incorporation of the Bolivarian Militia into the Armed Forces and an alliance with armed groups, known as\textit{colectivos}, to control the streets and intimidate opposition protests. The dissemination of government funds and arms to\textit{colectivos} made them political agents with enough power to compete with police for control of certain regions.\textsuperscript{89}

In addition,\textit{Chavista} ideology pervaded the Armed Forces over time. The Bolivarian Militia was established in the late-2000s as a branch of the Armed Forces; it is composed of civilians and responsible for “defending the Bolivarian Revolution from external and internal enemies.”\textsuperscript{90} This process of ideologization was relatively simple in the aftermath of the coup, as Venezuelan anthropologist Francine Jácome explains: "The frustrated coup allowed [Chávez] to purge the Armed Forces of two

\textsuperscript{88} Trinkunas, “Civil-Military Relations.”
\textsuperscript{89} Fisher and Taub, “El colapso de Venezuela explicado en cinco pasos.”
groups: those who were identified with the growing opposition movement, and the 'institutionalists', who did not align themselves with the Bolivarian discourse."

The military academy became an institution for indoctrination, under the new name Military Academy of the Bolivarian Army, and a new military motto was adopted: “Patria, Socialismo o Muerte,” which translates to “Homeland, Socialism or Death.”

The 2002 coup was hugely influential in establishing the security forces and military structures that exist in Venezuela today. The creation of the colectivos and the Bolivarian Militia formed part of the Venezuelan government’s strategy to harness the power of street-level mobilization, strengthening Chavismo’s presence while curtailing the opposition’s. These efforts, combined with the implementation of loyalty-based promotion systems and increased officer surveillance, succeeded in “coup-proofing” the regime. The ideologization of the military subjugated the institution to Chávez’s political project, leaving no room for impartiality or dissent. An important byproduct of this realignment was reduced accountability for the Chavista government.

The extensive military restructuring after the 2002 coup played an important role in the failure of electoral revolution in 2016-2017, since divisions among the state’s security forces would have to overcome these “coup-proofing” bulwarks to lead to democratic transition. The acute socioeconomic and humanitarian crisis that set in after Chávez’s death in 2013, however, meant the regime would need to resort

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91 Dario Mizrahi, “Cómo se construyó el poder militar en 20 años de chavismo: ¿Es posible su ruptura con Maduro?” Infobae, February 23, 2019.
92 Ibid.
93 Trinkunas, “Civil-Military Relations.”
to additional strategies to secure military loyalty and counteract mass mobilizations—namely, the Communal State.

**Consolidating Competitive Authoritarianism**

While the 1999 Constitution opened the doors to competitive authoritarianism in Venezuela, the 2002 coup attempt and 2002-2003 national strike led to its consolidation—this became apparent in 2004, when Chávez faced a disadvantageous referendum process. The “period of insurrection” evidenced the Chavista government’s need for partisan control of state institutions to incapacitate opposition and stay in power. Once Chavismo had successfully captured the country’s institutions, the government was able to use its institutional power to win a 2004 recall referendum that would have revoked Chávez’s mandate as president. The electoral machinations implemented during the 2004 referendum substantiate the consolidation of competitive authoritarianism in Venezuela at the time. Additionally, the success of Chavismo’s strategies during the referendum prompted efforts to institutionalize state-sponsored political mobilization through reforms that laid the groundwork for the Communal State.

While the 2002 coup disrupted Chávez’s trust in the military, the 2002-2003 national strike cemented the administration’s distrust of independent institutions and opposing sectors of Venezuelan civil society. In December 2002, the Coordinadora Democrática⁹⁴, led by the CTV and Fedecámaras, called for a fourth national strike demanding Chávez’s resignation that, when joined by the state oil company Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA), effectively paralyzed the country.

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⁹⁴ The Coordinadora Democrática was a coalition of political parties, civil society organizations, and NGOs that opposed Chávez’s administration; it was dissolved in 2004.
PDVSA's oil tankers were grounded and the company's management and operational staff abandoned their posts, crippling the oil industry and production of Venezuela's main export.\textsuperscript{95}

The strike lasted until February 2003, at which point the government managed to reestablish control over PDVSA by firing striking employees, replacing them with lower-level workers that either expressed loyalty to Chávez or rejected the company's participation in the strike. Roughly 40 percent of PDVSA's workforce was fired, substituting the company's old meritocratic structure with one favoring loyalty to the government.\textsuperscript{96} Additionally, the role of private media outlets, the Confederation of Workers of Venezuela (CTV), and Fedecámaras during the strike led Chávez to crack down on these opposition sectors: warrants were issued for the heads of Fedecámaras and the CTV and critical outlets were heavily fined or forced off the air in the following years.\textsuperscript{97} Chavismo soon began colonizing the country's remaining independent institutions, which were seen as a threat. When the courts challenged Chávez, he suspended judges and filled the Supreme Court with supporters.\textsuperscript{98}

Despite Chávez's victory over opponents during the “insurrectional period,” the economic and political instability of the early 2000s negatively affected his approval rating. Polls conducted in August 2003 indicated “only 35 to 40 percent [of

\textsuperscript{95} Bart Jones, Hugo! The Hugo Chávez Story from Mud Hut to Perpetual Revolution (London: Bodley Head, 2008), 375.

\textsuperscript{96} Michael J. McCaughan, The Battle of Venezuela (London: Seven Stories Press, 2004), 128.

\textsuperscript{97} The free-to-air television network Radio Caracas Televisión’s (RCTV) broadcast concession was revoked without trial in 2007 for its alleged role in the 2002 coup; RCTV was one of the country's oldest television outlets and ran an anti-Chávez editorial line.

\textsuperscript{98} Fisher and Taub, “El colapso de Venezuela explicado en cinco pasos.”
Venezuelans] wanted [Chávez] to stay.”99 Seeking to capitalize on this unpopularity, the political opposition activated a recall referendum that required the collection and submission of more than 2.4 million signatures to the National Electoral Council (Consejo Nacional Electoral, CNE).100 The referendum would have removed the president from office if successful. Although the political opposition submitted nearly 3.2 million signatures on 20 August 2003, the government-controlled CNE purposely delayed the signature verification process using “official maneuvers of dubious legality.”101 The CNE finally announced the election date nine months later, setting the referendum for 15 August 2004—an entire year after the initial submission of signatures. As Venezuelan political scientist and former vice-president of the CNE (1998-1999) Miriam Kornblith explains:

The government used all the resources at its disposal in an effort to stop the opposition from convening the recall. Failing that, the government’s strategy was to play for time during which it could alter the political landscape in Chávez’s favor.102

Political scientist Javier Corrales describes the regime’s machinations during this period as “autocratic legalism,” that is “the use, abuse, and non-use (in Spanish, desuso) of the law in service of the executive branch.”103 The verbose wording on the ballot is just one example of the election authorities’ concerted effort to benefit

100 Article 72 of the Constitution “states that any elected public official will become subject to a recall if, after the midpoint of the official’s term, 20 percent of the voters in the relevant constituency sign a petition asking for such a vote. The official must leave office if at least 25 percent of registered voters take part in the referendum, and if at least as many votes are cast in favor of recall as were cast for him or her during the election” (Kornblith, 125).
102 Ibid, 128.
103 Corrales, “Autocratic Legalism,” 38.
Chávez by confusing voters: "Do you agree with rendering ineffective the people’s mandate given through legitimate democratic elections to the citizen Hugo Rafael Chávez Frias as president of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela for the current presidential period?" The operative word “recall” is not mentioned once.

Increasing global oil prices also proved pivotal during the year, as Chávez’s government used oil rents to fund the massive expansion of new social programs in an effort to raise the president’s approval rating. Suddenly, vast petrodollar revenues became available to the government as global prices reached $40 and $50 per barrel.\textsuperscript{104} The state-run social “missions” known as the Bolivarian Missions (\textit{Misiones Bolivarianas}) became the hallmark of Chávez’s agenda, and the president’s image was directly linked to the programs.\textsuperscript{105} The Bolivarian Missions, sustained almost entirely by the climbing price of oil, led to dramatic improvements in the quality of life of poor Venezuelans. The most famous programs included \textit{Misión Robinson} (increasing literacy), \textit{Misión Barrio Adentro} (access to medical care), and \textit{Misión Mercal} (subsidized food).\textsuperscript{106} A poll conducted in June 2004 by Caracas-based Consultores 21 revealed that 43 percent of those interviewed indicated that “either they or someone close to them had benefited from the government’s actions.”\textsuperscript{107} This illustrates the social missions’ widespread impact at the time, directly affecting nearly half of the population.

\textsuperscript{105} Kornblith, “Elections vs. Democracy,” 133
\textsuperscript{106} Venezuela, Ministerio de Comunicación e Información, \textit{Las Misiones Bolivarianas}, 1st ed. (Caracas, 2006).
\textsuperscript{107} Kornblith, “Elections vs. Democracy,” 135
The combined autocratic legalism and social-spending strategies were ultimately successful in subverting electoral competition. In the end, Chávez won the referendum with 58 percent of the final vote, a victory that seemed highly implausible only a few months earlier. The 2004 recall referendum was a quintessential example of competitive authoritarianism, where institutional power was wielded within the framework of electoral competition to hinder opposition and ensure the incumbent's victory. The referendum also taught Chavista officials the extent to which clientelistic local-level social programs could influence electoral processes in their favor, giving rise to policy blueprints that would soon institutionalize these advantages.

**Communal Councils: Self-Governance or Clientelism?**

In 2006, the Chavista-majority National Assembly\(^\text{108}\) passed the Law of Communal Councils (*Ley de Consejos Comunales*), building on nascent systems for community-based self-governance. According to the law, the councils operated within the framework of “participatory and protagonist democracy” enshrined in the 1999 Constitution:

The Communal Councils [...] are instances of participation, articulation and integration between the various community organizations, social groups and citizens, which allow the organized people to directly exercise the management of public policies and projects aimed at responding to the needs and aspirations of the communities in the construction of a society of equity and social justice.\(^\text{109}\)

\(^\text{108}\) The core opposition parties boycotted the 2005 National Assembly over concerns with the integrity and impartiality of the CNE, granting Chavismo all the seats in the 2005-2010 National Assembly.

Some scholars, such as Michael McCarthy, have analyzed the top-down and bottom-up elements of the councils, attempting to determine whether they were conceived to be clientelistic spaces imposed by an autocratic populist (top-down) or part of a genuine effort to redistribute political power (bottom-up).\textsuperscript{110} If we consider, though, that the Venezuelan government would have likely tried to further institutionalize the local presence that helped Chávez win the 2004 referendum, the councils would corroborate the top-down hypothesis. It is therefore plausible that the councils were at least partially informed by the lessons learned during the referendum. If we take into account the political developments that followed, however, there is no doubt that, regardless of their initial purpose, Communal Councils later became key components of authoritarian consolidation.

The Communal Councils were preceded by earlier mechanisms that empowered citizens to address the infrastructural problems facing their communities, most notably the Technical Water Committees (\textit{Mesas Técnicas de Agua}) and Social Consortiums (\textit{Conсорcios Sociales}). The first Technical Water Committees were established in the 1990s, bringing the community and water authorities together to address shortages in impoverished areas with limited access to water.\textsuperscript{111} The participation of community members was key to the efficient development of water infrastructure in these areas. López Maya illustrates the


\textsuperscript{111} McCarthy, "Populism in Power," vii.
impact these committees had on urban infrastructure development with a hypothetical scenario:

Imagine a company arrives at the barrio,\textsuperscript{112} breaks up a street without asking and doesn’t find the water pipes they are looking for. The neighbors surely know where to dig because one of them [previously] diverted the pipe—that’s what unplanned urban areas are like.\textsuperscript{113}

The Technical Water Committees were expanded in Chávez’s first government, leading to the development of Social Consortiums (\textit{Consortios Sociales}) that went beyond water infrastructure. The consortiums joined citizens and technicians to address other urban sector issues in the community.\textsuperscript{114} The initial concept of Communal Councils was to establish a more permanent platform for these forms of infrastructure planning, but this goal was later deviated from.

Although the Technical Water Committees and Social Consortiums served as precursors to Communal Councils, there are some key features that differentiate the latter as more conducive to clientelism. Communal Councils did not truly begin to form until after the 2006 Law of Communal Councils was promulgated. The law separated the bodies from municipal governments, placing them instead under the direct authority of the Executive Branch.\textsuperscript{115} Communal Councils were required to register under the Presidential Commission for Popular Power (\textit{Comisión Presidencial del Poder Popular}), members of which were directly appointed by

\textsuperscript{112} The word \textit{Barrio}, in Venezuela, carries a socioeconomic connotation and refers to impoverished neighborhoods that are often unplanned.


\textsuperscript{114} Ibid, 42.

\textsuperscript{115} National Assembly, \textit{Ley de Consejos Comunales}, Article 20.
Chávez on the national, regional, and local levels. According to the law, the president was responsible for allocating funds for the communal bodies. This meant communities began associating the funds with Chávez personally, rather than the state. This enormous dependence on the Executive was undoubtedly the largest difference between the Communal Councils and their antecedents.

Additionally, councils were required to organize and vote within the specific procedural parameters outlined by the Presidential Commission and the 2006 law. To establish a new council, members of the community first work with a representative from the Presidential Commission to conduct a census of their community. They then gather at least 10 percent of the community (ages 15 and older) to convene the first Assembly of Citizens (Asamblea de Ciudadanos). This Assembly is the primary decision-making body and all its “decisions are binding for the respective Communal Council.” There are three central organisms that comprise the council: the executive committee, the financial body, and the auditing body. The financial and auditing bodies are each made up of five elected community representatives and are tasked with managing and monitoring the Communal Council’s projects and funds. The Assembly also designates the creation of work committees (comités de trabajo) and elects spokespeople for each respective committee. The number and nature of the committees is for the Assembly to decide, some examples include Committees on Health, Education, Land, Health, and Education.

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116 González, Estado Descomunal, 44.
117 Once conformed, quorum was set at 20 percent of the community.
118 National Assembly, Ley de Consejos Comunales, Article 4, Subsection 5.
119 These are the órgano ejecutivo, Unidad de Gestión Financiera, and Unidad de Contraloría Social, respectively.
120 National Assembly, Ley de Consejos Comunales, Article 19.
Media and Information, Housing and Habitat, Culture, Recreation and Sports, etc. The executive committee, comprised of spokespeople from the various work committees, is responsible for enacting the decisions made by the Assembly of Citizens.

As demonstrated by their political roots and vertical structure, Communal Councils were unambiguously clientelistic in nature. The president’s control over the organization, formation, and resources of the councils established a direct corridor for clientelistic practices between Chávez and the network of participating local communities. This meant the central government could bypass municipal and state governments held by opposition parties to continue accruing political capital. It should be noted, though, that many Venezuelans viewed this centralization under the president positively; some social activists “thought that [it would provide] a solution to the bureaucratic obstacles that existed in the municipalities to channel money into solving local problems.”

On the surface, Communal Councils appeared in line with Chávez’s "participatory democracy" rhetoric, empowering sectors of society that had previously been excluded from state-society relations during the Punto Fijo era. However, Chávez’s image was closely associated with the councils, which homogenized them into majority-Chavista spaces. Their inherent connection to Chávez’s political project meant “the councils themselves [were] pregnant with political meaning.” In other words, due to their political relevance, Venezuelans supporting the president were likely to participate in Communal Councils while

121 González, Estado Descomunal, 43.
opponents were not. It is also important to note that escalating oil prices buoyed these clientelistic networks; Chávez reaped the rewards of massive oil revenues, funneling money to the Communal Councils. The president’s popularity rose spectacularly and Chávez won reelection in December 2006 with 63 percent of the vote. After the election, the Communal Councils gained a new ideological purpose as part of the Communal State.

**The Communal State**

In January 2007, a month after being reelected president, Chávez launched his ambitiously radical political project known as *Socialism of the 21st Century*. This form of socialism became associated with the leaders of Latin America’s turn to the left during the first decade of the twentieth century, including Evo Morales (Bolivia), Lula da Silva (Brazil), and Néstor Kirchner (Argentina), among others. Hugo Chávez, however, was the leader of the region’s ideological movement. In Venezuela, Chávez’s *Socialism of the 21st Century* was embodied by a new state structure known as the Communal State, which sought the gradual dissolution of “capitalism and the institutions of liberal democracy.”

In order to “complete the transition to a socialist republic,” Chávez proposed a constitutional referendum in 2007 to amend 69 articles of the same Constitution he promulgated in 1999. The proposal included an extensive range of peripheral amendments, such as banning discrimination based on sexual orientation, lowering

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the voting age, and reducing the standard workweek, as well as the bizarre renaming of Caracas to “Caracas, Bolivar’s Cradle and Queen of the Guaraira Repano.”  

The bulk of the amendments, however, entailed an alarming concentration of power that portended authoritarian rule. The most concerning proposals included permission for the president to declare an indefinite state of emergency, ending central bank autonomy, allowing public funding for political groups, prohibiting large land holdings, abolishing presidential term limits, and reorganizing administrative districts and regions under increased presidential control.  

The core constitutional amendments attempted to incorporate the bases for the Communal State into the magna carta. The reform would have created an additional branch of government—the “Popular Power” Branch (Poder Popular), composed of representation from the Communal Councils and other communal institutions under the president’s direct influence. The Popular Power Branch would have had the right to participate within the ambit of municipal authorities, form part of joint committees with the National Assembly to select Supreme Court Justices, and become the sole authority over appointees to the National Electoral Council. Additionally, the reform would have restructured territorial administrative divisions to make cities, comprised of communal institutions, the country’s fundamental polity instead of municipalities. The president, with the approval of the

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126 The city’s official name is Santiago de León de Caracas; Guaraira Repano is the indigenous name for the Ávila mountain range often considered a symbol of Caracas.
128 Ibid, Articles 136, 168, 264, and 296.
National Assembly, would also have the power to create new territorial divisions, regions, and districts.\textsuperscript{129}

While Chávez and his party insisted the amendments were necessary to transform Venezuela into a socialist country, opponents denounced the proposed changes as an undeniable shift toward dictatorship. The immense concentration of power in the presidency belied the government’s dogma of participative democracy and community-oriented governance. Opposition and government parties once again engaged in a charged electoral campaign. The ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) focused on the social aspects of the proposal, while opposition emphasized that the radical and ideologically exclusive character of the reform package undermined democracy and subverted constitutional order.

In the end, Venezuelans narrowly rejected the measure by a one-percent margin. Abstention among traditionally Chavista voters ultimately defeated the constitutional reform—only 56 percent of registered voters participated. This constituted Chávez’s first and only electoral defeat throughout his 14 years in power. His concession speech, however, overtly foreshadowed the future incorporation of the reforms in spite of the referendum’s result:

\begin{quote}
I congratulate my adversaries for this victory. We are made for a long battle. I could repeat a phrase here today that also emerged from my soul 15 years ago [...] on 4 February 1992: \textit{por ahora no pudimos}. [...] I want you to know that I do not withdraw a single comma from this [constitutional] proposal. I continue making this proposal to the Venezuelan people. This proposal is still alive, it has not died.\textsuperscript{130}
\end{quote}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid, Articles 11, 16, and 18.
\textsuperscript{130} Hugo Chávez, “Chávez reconoce el triunfo del NO,” \textit{Venezolana de Televisión} (Speech, Caracas, December 3, 2007).
\end{flushleft}
Chávez’s reference to the phrase *por ahora no pudimos*, meaning "we were unsuccessful, for now," echoed his statement after his 1992 military coup failed. The insinuation was that the electoral defeat would just delay the project rather than halt it. Perhaps unsurprisingly, another Chávez-led constitutional referendum was held in 2009 on the question of abolishing term limits—a measure that had been rejected as part of the 2007 reform package. This time Chávez was triumphant, opening the doors for his indefinite reelection.131 The trend of overriding electoral defeats using institutional maneuvers was not just evidence of competitive authoritarianism, it also signaled the regime’s increasing comfort with, and reliance on, authoritarian practices. After 2009, ignoring the plebiscitary rejection of his socialist project, Chávez turned to the National Assembly to enact the Communal State using organic laws.132

According to Chavista ideology, “popular power” (*poder popular*) “is the complete exercise of sovereignty by the people […] through the diverse and dissimilar forms of organization that comprise the Communal State.”133 Therefore, “popular power” served as the underpinning force legitimizing the new State. After 2007, the term permeated most government institutions; for example, the tagline

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“of the Popular Power” was added to all government ministries (e.g. the Ministry of Education became the Ministry of Popular Power for Education).\textsuperscript{134}

In the lead up to the 2009 referendum, it became clear that the \textit{Chavista} government’s interpretation of “popular power” was politically exclusive. On a national broadcast, the Minister of Popular Power for Social Development called on the Communal Councils and other communal institutions to mobilize and campaign in favor of the constitutional amendment:

From this moment going forward every communal council constitutes a committee for the YES vote. [...] It is important to understand that this is political work; we must put any other project aside for the battle. [...] The committees must become patrols so that every \textit{Chavista} votes. We need to mobilize and organize.\textsuperscript{135}

This signaled a programmatic shift for Communal Councils, which had evolved into mechanisms for institutionalized mobilization in addition to clientelistic networks. In 2009, the 2006 Law on Communal Council was reformed as the Organic Law on Communal Councils (\textit{Ley Orgánica de los Consejos Comunales}). López Maya highlights two important changes to the nature of the councils in the reformed law.\textsuperscript{136} The first was redefining the purpose of the councils to include “the construction of the new model of socialist society.”\textsuperscript{137} In some cases, generally in middle-income areas, councils were refused registration before the government for not being “demonstrably socialist” (i.e. lacking sufficient United Socialist Party

\textsuperscript{136} López Maya, \textit{El caso del chavismo}, 100-101.
representation among council members). The second change was empowering the Ministry of Popular Power with the authority to “dictate [emphasis added] the strategic policies, general plans, programs and projects for the communal participation in public affairs” for Communal Councils. These changes undercut the limited autonomy and “popular power” concentrated in individual councils, making them contingent on commitment to the socialist project and subjugating them to the ministry’s tutelage. Yet, the fact that the councils were largely pro-Chávez made backlash from the bodies themselves highly improbable. Communal Councils therefore became ideal building blocks for a state structure the government could easily control.

Governance models similar to the Communal State can be traced to socialist theorists like Anton Pannekoek, Murray Bookchin, Peter Kropotkin, Rudolf Rocker, and Mikhail Bakunin. All of which, in some way, postulate worker communes and communal governance. Although these theorists predated Chávez, many of their theories clearly inspired the Communal State. In both theory and practice, the Chavista model of communal governance was remarkably similar to the early Soviet Union’s. The Bolsheviks used existing worker’s councils (soviets, in Russian) to build ascending layers of elected councils that culminated in the Congress of Soviets (predecessor to the Supreme Soviet). Shortly after overthrowing the Russian provisional government in 1917, the Bolshevik Party asserted control over the

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138 González, Estado Descomunal, 51.
139 Ibid, Article 56.
soviets and established single-party rule. This use of council-based political structures to consolidate authoritarianism was later replicated in Venezuela.

The Communal State’s theorized structure is complicated, involving convoluted networks of councils, committees, and other institutions (See Fig. 1). In theory, Communal Councils organize into Communes (Comunas), which aggregate into Communal Cities (Ciudades Comunales), joining as Communal Federations (Federaciones Comunales), and then as Communal Confederations (Confederaciones Comunales). The combination of Communal Confederations ultimately constitutes the overarching Communal State. In practice, however, Communes are the highest-level institution that has developed in Venezuela to date. The Communal Parliament is the Commune’s decision-making body; it is comprised mostly of elected spokespeople from the Communal Councils that operate within the Commune’s territory. The Parliament then elects an Executive Council that is responsible for enacting the decisions made by the Commune. Ten management committees coordinate the Commune’s projects and are composed of representatives from the respective work committees in each of the Commune’s constituent Communal Councils. The Commune also encompasses financial, judicial, electoral, and auditing bodies.

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142 National Assembly, Ley Orgánica de las Comunas, Articles 21, 23, 27, 31.
Figure 1 (Source: Marregot)

The complicated array of committees and councils fragments “popular power,” favoring centralization under the president. The 2010 Organic Law on the Federal Government Council (Ley Orgánica del Consejo Federal de Gobierno) gave Chávez the authority to designate territorial divisions known as Distrito Motores de Desarrollo.143 These were districts that would help develop Communes into eventual Communal Cities; each distrito motor had an appointed district chief that would administer it.144 In this swarm of power dynamics, however, true power resides in

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144 Venezuela, National Assembly, Ley Orgánica del Consejo Federal de Gobierno, in Gaceta Oficial N° 5963 Extraordinaria, Caracas, 22 February 2010, Articles 5-7; Venezuela, Presidential Decree N° 7306, Reglamento de la Ley Orgánica del Consejo Federal de Gobierno, in Gaceta Oficial Nº 39382, Caracas, 9 March 2010, Articles 24 and 25.
the hands of the Executive. As the driving force for Communal State development, the president’s administration wields decisive influence and virtual veto power over each level of communal governance.

![Executive Overwhelms “Popular Power”](image)

**Figure 2 (Source: UDONE)**

The atomized power held by Communes and Communal Councils is incomparable to the amount of decision-making power held by the Executive through the *distrito motores*. The Collectives of Communal Coordination and Commune Executive Councils, weakened by an imposed system of indirect elections to the second and third degree, are completely subdued by the centralized authority (See Fig. 2). There is no accountability for the central government and zero constraints on decisions from above. Additionally, the Communal State sterilizes its capabilities by institutionalizing decision-making in an interminable labyrinth of

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145 These were added to Communal Councils under the 2009 reform, the collectives are comprised of spokespeople from the council’s different bodies.
assemblies and committees. Moreover, in order to have any voice or influence, citizens are required to constantly participate in assemblies, parliamentary procedures, street-based governance and work committees. The result is a governance structure based on laborious participation that further insulates higher authorities from accountability.

From an implementation standpoint, the Communal State reveals additional threats to democratic governance. The State’s ultimate purpose is to create a “socialist society” by gradually replacing the Federal State elaborated in the 1999 Constitution. The transitory condition implies the Communal and Federal State must paradoxically coexist until the socialist society has been consolidated. There are several issues with this dynamic, primarily deriving from the fact that the objective of “achieving a socialist society” is so broad and undefined that a clear goal or timeline for said transformation is impossible to determine. Hence, the duality of the Federal and Communal State would realistically continue in perpetuity, which has additional implications for democratic order.

The existence of dual state structures generates a competition for legitimacy that the centralized government, with control of the Supreme Court and other institutions, can ultimately steer in its favor. That is to say, the government effectively has the ability to transfer power to Communal State institutions whenever this proves politically convenient. For instance, imagine the ruling party experienced significant losses in municipal elections; the central government could simply decide to “expand” the Communal State by transferring authority from the

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146 López Maya, *El ocaso del chavismo*, 95.
municipalities to Communal Councils, effectively nullifying the undesired election results. A large-scale version of this strategy was implemented in 2015, when *Chavismo* lost control of the National Assembly. In the end, between *Chavismo’s* “radical aspirations to establish self-governing democratic institutions [...] and more pragmatic imperatives to” maintain the movement’s hegemony over the state, the latter ultimately took priority.\(^{147}\)

**Conclusions**

A common thread connects the string of political developments in Venezuela from 1999 to 2015: *Chavismo’s* adaptability. Authoritarian consolidation was not rapid in Venezuela; it was the result of incremental strategies for the *Chavista* government’s survival being gradually institutionalized. This chapter has outlined how repeated threats against *Chavismo’s* hegemony developed the first stages of the military and bottom-up strategies for authoritarian consolidation. Chávez learned from each thwarted opposition offensive, building off the programs and policies that permitted *Chavismo* to prevail in each case. Starting in 1999, with his new “Bolivarian” Constitution in hand, Chávez struggled against robust, yet unorganized, opposition from labour unions, business federations, PDVSA technocrats, and sectors of the Armed Forces. These actors periodically aligned to launch several unsuccessful all-or-nothing attempts to remove the president from power. After surviving intense political turmoil in the early 2000s, *Chavismo* learned to protect its government by purging institutions of dissidents. Over time, *Chavismo* itself became synonymous with the Venezuelan state. The Armed Forces were restructured and

engulfed by *Chavista* ideology, amalgamating the military institution into Chávez’s political project. This eroded the military’s ability to hold the government accountable for future anti-democratic transgressions. Additionally, control over key government institutions, like the electoral authority, established safeguards that protected the regime from future threats to *Chavismo’s* state hegemony.

These safeguards were first tested during the 2004 recall referendum; the institutional power *Chavismo* had amassed was instrumental to Chávez’s victory. New social spending programs radically transformed Chávez’s prospects for the referendum and he defeated the recall by more than 1.8 million votes.\(^{148}\) Again, Chávez learned from his victory, institutionalizing clientelistic networks in the form of Communal Councils. The councils then developed into a parallel socialist state that undermined the Federal State’s restrictions on the central government by undercutting multi-party elections and accountability. The Communal State project signals the end of competitive authoritarian rule in Venezuela, setting the stage for a shift toward hegemonic authoritarianism. It was not until 2015, however, that an overwhelming defeat in the National Assembly elections put all of *Chavismo’s* authoritarian safeguards to the test.

Chapter IV: Approaching Electoral Revolution

In 2015, the Venezuelan government had two strategies for authoritarian consolidation at its disposal: a military strategy and the Communal State. These had emerged in the previous decade of competitive authoritarianism. Recalling Göbel’s definition for “authoritarian consolidation,” there are three types of power that authoritarian elites can expand to enhance their ability to govern society: infrastructural, discursive, and despotic power. These are defined as the power “inherent in regulating society through institutions and organizations” (infrastructural power), making “people want what the government wants them to want” (discursive power) and the ability to “coerce one’s will on the people” (despotic power). After the president’s death in 2013, the government altered and repurposed the institutions developed under Chávez to further consolidate authoritarian rule.

This chapter analyzes how these institutions were altered in the aftermath of Chávez’s death and outlines the role they played in the failure of electoral revolution between 2016 and 2017. Specifically, it examines the expanded incentives that strengthened the military’s loyalty and illustrates how the Communal State was transformed into a system for hunger-based social control. These late-stage iterations of the military and bottom-up strategies for authoritarian consolidation are what ultimately allowed the regime to successfully resist the pressures conducive to electoral revolution.

During the 2000s, Chavismo’s entrenchment across Venezuela’s institutions considerably increased the party’s infrastructural power. Chávez’s growing control over the state and imposition of party-aligned Communal State governance structures also dramatically amplified the United Socialist Party of Venezuela’s (PSUV) ability to regulate society. After Chávez’s death, however, amid growing government unpopularity and a crippling humanitarian crisis, the eroding Chavista regime began developing despotic and discursive capacities through the military and the Communal State. This was due to issues maintaining the clientelistic programs that underpinned Chavismo’s continued electoral competitiveness.

![Venezuela's Crude Oil Production Versus Global Prices, 1994–2018](chart)

*Figure 3 (Source: CFR)*

A changing economic landscape exacerbated instability after Chávez’s death. The crash of global oil prices forced the government to escalate authoritarian consolidation. For most of contemporary history, Venezuela has operated as an oil-based rentier state—oil accounts for 96 percent of the country’s exports.150 As a

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result, the Venezuelan economy has historically mirrored the booms and busts of the international oil market.\textsuperscript{151} The vast revenues that Chávez enjoyed for the majority of his government, however, were truly unprecedented, with oil prices reaching $100 a barrel in both 2008 and 2013 (See Fig. 3). Chávez’s policies and social programs depended almost entirely on subsidies derived from skyrocketing oil prices. Foreign exchange controls, mass expropriations, and abuse of private industry, however, led to shortages of food and other basic goods at the end of the decade.\textsuperscript{152}

Chávez blamed these economic consequences on an “economic war” waged by the country’s private sector.\textsuperscript{153} This artificial “economic war” became the go-to scapegoat for government mismanagement in the following years. When oil prices collapsed in 2014, a year after Chávez’s death, Venezuela suffered immense revenue losses that abruptly wiped out subsidies. In 2014, anti-government protests erupted across the country as Venezuelans demonstrated against high crime rates, hyperinflation, and scarcity of food and medicine. The exacerbated socioeconomic condition and mass mobilizations enfeebled Chavismo’s grasp on the Venezuelan state. Furthermore, after the president’s death in 2013, no one—not even PSUV elites—truly knew what Chavismo without Chávez was meant to look like.

\textit{Chavismo without Chávez}

On 7 October 2012, Chávez won reelection for the third time, which Chavismo interpreted as an approval of the president’s Communal State project. Again, the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{151} Ruth Krivoy, “Venezuela: From Free Fall to Recovery,” (Lecture, Stanford University, March 2, 2019).
\item \textsuperscript{152} Friesen, “The Path To Hyperinflation.”
\item \textsuperscript{153} “Chávez declara ‘guerra económica’ a burguesía en Venezuela,” Reuters, June 2, 2010.
\end{itemize}
Chavista government overrode the vision’s initial rejection via referendum in 2007. The interpretation that the president’s reelection constituted popular approval of the project was irrational but not surprising, considering the extent to which Chávez’s charismatic image was intertwined with his government’s policies. The Communal State, and Chavismo itself, revolved around Chávez as an individual. The president heavily emphasized that he wanted his socialism “to be born as his personal project, in his own handwriting.” Chávez’s zealous political will was the driving force behind Chavismo and its socialist project, which derived entirely from his personal ideology. After all, supporters of Chávez identified politically as Chavistas, not socialistas or PSUVistas. The movement’s messianic essence meant Chavismo without its charismatic leader was near unimaginable—since, for all intents and purposes, Chavismo was Chávez.

On 5 March 2013, after months of mystery surrounding the president’s health, Vice President Nicolás Maduro announced Chávez’s death. When the news broke, it briefly paralyzed the nation. Chávez was an omnipotent figure in Venezuelan politics and society; his death cause ripples across the country, stirring sorrow amongst fervent supporters and silent optimism within opponents. Once immediate reactions subsided, however, one question settled in many Venezuelans’ minds: What comes next? Who could fill the immense vacuum left by Chávez and what would become of Chavismo?

In one of his last public appearances, Chávez asked supporters to elect his vice president, Nicolás Maduro, to continue the Bolivarian Revolution if he were unable to complete his mandate as president:

If something were to happen, [...] my firm, plain, irrevocable, absolute, and total opinion is that, in this scenario, which would result in presidential elections, you choose Nicolás Maduro as president of the Bolivarian Republic. I ask this from the bottom of my heart.156

In April 2013, Maduro ran for president against opposition candidate Henrique Capriles Radonski, who had lost to Chávez by more than 1.5 million votes in 2012.157 Throughout the election, Chavismo exploited Chávez’s memory to garner votes. For example, the party’s campaign slogan was “Chávez te lo juro, mi voto es pa’ Maduro” (Chávez I swear to you, my vote is for Maduro). The anointment of Maduro as “the son of Chávez” also helped sustain support for Chavismo.158 In the end, Maduro narrowly won the election by roughly 200,000 votes, a sharp contrast to Chávez’s margin of victory only six months earlier.

Still, the election revealed the impact Chávez’s death had on Chavismo’s political appeal. Chávez once said in 2008 that all votes for the PSUV and its allies were his, not for the individual candidates.159 Without Chávez behind them, stand-alone PSUV candidates would struggle to capture votes. The existing competitive authoritarian regime, built under Chávez’s charismatic authority, held enough

158 Daniel Pardo, “¿Cuán dividido está el chavismo a un año de la muerte de Hugo Chávez?” BBC Mundo, March 5, 2014.
159 López Maya, “El incierto porvenir,” 102.
institutional power to secure Maduro’s victory in 2013, but the margin remained dangerously close. Chávez’s fading memory posed a growing threat to Chavismo’s electoral competitiveness despite institutional advantages. Additionally, the absence of Chávez was a catalyst for uncertainty within Chavismo’s political and military ranks. With the movement’s kingpin gone, party unity and military loyalty were suddenly at stake. The new administration had to take additional steps to consolidate power, starting with reinforced loyalty incentives within the Armed Forces.

The Maduro regime dramatically increased its despotic power capabilities by ceding power and privileges to trusted sectors of the Armed Forces. At the time, ubiquity of Chavista ideology within the military was no longer enough to guarantee loyalty. Military sectors could realistically rebel against Maduro if they felt he was deviating from Chávez’s vision, which became ambiguous in the late-president’s absence. Additionally, Maduro did not share Chávez’s military background and, as a result, had a different initial relationship with the Armed Forces. All these factors led Maduro’s regime to reinforce loyalty using two strategies: bureaucratic benefits and surveillance.
The first step was to stack the Armed Forces with ideologues and loyalists, particularly by adding members to the Bolivarian Militia and awarding an astronomical number of promotions. According to World Bank data drawing from official figures, the total number of Armed Forces personnel doubled between 2013 and 2014, jumping from 115,000 to 265,000 members. This trend continued and the total number reached 343,000 by 2017 (See Fig. 4).\textsuperscript{160} In addition, Maduro awarded so many mid- and high-level promotions in exchange for loyalty that the number of generals in the Armed Forces surpassed 2,000.\textsuperscript{161} This is an extraordinary amount of generals, especially for a country without major international security concerns. For reference, the total limit for general officers between the U.S. Army, Navy, Air

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure4}
\caption{Armed Forces Personnel (in thousands)}
\end{figure}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{160} “Armed forces personnel, total,” \textit{International Institute for Strategic Studies, The Military Balance}.
\item \textsuperscript{161} Ellen Mitchel, “Pentagon official: Military ready to protect US personnel, facilities in Venezuela,” \textit{The Hill}, February 7, 2019.
\end{itemize}
Force and Marine Corps is 653.\textsuperscript{162} According to Craig Faller, head of U.S. Southern Command, Venezuela’s Armed Forces has more generals “than all of NATO combined.”\textsuperscript{163} Hence, under Maduro, the Armed Forces were transformed to operate under an increasingly horizontal hierarchical structure. This further diluted individual generals’ authority, complicating the possibility of organized rebellion within the military.

The Armed Forces also enjoyed increased privileges under Maduro, including access to bureaucracy and lucrative state enterprises. Maduro appointed members of the military to bureaucratic positions, especially those that managed huge sums of money. Chávez also had military officers in his cabinet, but the practice was accelerated under Maduro. According to the Venezuelan NGO Control Ciudadano, the percentage of ministry positions held by active military officers went from 25 percent to 48 percent between 2014 and 2017.\textsuperscript{164} Military presence in PDVSA also expanded; Maduro appointed major general Manuel Quevedo to head the state oil company in 2017.\textsuperscript{165} These positions granted easy access to cash flows, benefiting military officers by facilitating corruption. The broader military corps was also offered material incentives, like access to a preferential military bank and special

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{162} “Authorized strength: general and flag officers on active duty,” 10 U.S. Code § 526, available at https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/10/526.
  \item \textsuperscript{163} Mitchel, “Military ready to protect US personnel.”
  \item \textsuperscript{165} Alexandra Ulmer and Deisy Buitrago, “Maduro designa a militar como jefe de PDVSA y ministro de Petróleo de Venezuela,” \textit{Reuters}, November 26, 2017.
\end{itemize}
food, housing, and vehicle subsidy programs. These privileges incentivized loyalty among the Armed Forces by melding them into Chavismo’s state apparatus.

Although opportunities for corruption could reinforce loyalty, they also provided leverage for the government to punish potential renegades. As International Crisis Group senior analyst Phil Gunson explains, if these military officers “are corrupt and intelligence bodies stay informed about who is stealing, then [the government] can construct large files on each individual.” Surveillance conducted through agencies like the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional, SEBIN) was used to detect anti-government and “counterrevolutionary” attitudes within the Armed Forces. The collected information led to tacit coercion, obligating officials to remain loyal if they engaged in corrupt practices. For example, if an official exhibited signs of disloyalty, the government could use the collected evidence to imprison them under an anti-corruption pretense. All these factors produced a structurally fragmented, heavily surveilled military with deep roots in state bureaucracy. This, in turn, deterred military insurgency against the post-Chávez regime.

Securing the Armed Forces’ loyalty was the first of many obstacles for Chavismo’s continued hegemony. In addition to bolstering unity by dissuading fractures within the regime, control over the military meant the Armed Forces could become a more reliable mechanism for coercive power if the government faced mass mobilizations. This was the case in 2014, when student protests against the

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167 Bermúdez, “Crisis en Venezuela.”
crisis ignited countrywide anti-government demonstrations. *Chavismo* employed the Armed Forces, in addition to its *colectivos* and other allied paramilitary groups, to violently repress protesters. Total casualties included 41 deaths, more than 800 injuries, 3,351 arrests, and several instances of torture.\textsuperscript{168} Maduro’s regime ended 2014 with record levels of unpopularity: the president’s approval rating was merely 22 percent and 60 percent believed he should resign the presidency.\textsuperscript{169} Despite its fortified support within the Armed Forces and amid plummeting oil prices, mounting socioeconomic pressures, and record unpopularity, institutional advantages would no longer be enough to revitalize *Chavismo*’s electoral competitiveness.

**2015 Elections: Losing the National Assembly**

The path to electoral revolution opened up in December 2015, when the opposition’s coalition (*Mesa de la Unidad Democrática*, MUD) won a resounding majority in the National Assembly. During the parliamentary elections, the government once again used institutional and public resources to promote candidates nominated by the PSUV and its allies, without sanction from the CNE.\textsuperscript{170} The electoral strategy also hinged on the continued apotheosis of Chávez’s image, but memory of the former-president was fading and could only stretch so far. Unpopularity for Maduro’s administration and unity amongst the opposition ultimately outweighed the competitive authoritarian regime. Despite countless efforts to skew the election in favor of *Chavismo*, the opposition emerged victorious.

\textsuperscript{168} López Maya, *El ocaso*, 326.
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid, 327.
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid, 342.
with two-thirds control of the National Assembly. This was a devastating loss for Chavismo. Government candidates were even defeated in Chavista strongholds like the 23 de Enero parish in Caracas, where Chávez’s remains are buried. The defeat’s magnitude shocked and worried PSUV elites; losing all influence in the National Assembly posed a major threat, rupturing the party’s hegemony over the state.

The National Assembly has considerable jurisdiction as the Legislative Branch of the Venezuelan government. A two-thirds majority can draft and revoke organic laws, remove and appoint Supreme Court Justices, and designate officials to the CNE. With increased accountability under the new parliament, the PSUV’s 17-year custom of ruling unilaterally seemed to be at its end. Before the new Assembly could even be sworn in, however, the government initiated last-minute efforts to undermine the incoming parliament. The first strategy focused on diminishing the opposition’s majority. The opposition won a total of 112 seats, which constitutes a two-thirds majority of the Assembly’s 167 seats by exactly one deputy. The same month of the election, the Supreme Court suspended three deputies-elect from the sparsely populated state of Amazonas as a “precautionary measure,” while supposed election irregularities were investigated in the state. This action robbed the opposition of its two-thirds majority before even being sworn into office.

171 Daniel Pardo, “¿Cómo quedan Maduro y el chavismo tras su derrota en las elecciones parlamentarias en Venezuela?” BBC Mundo, December 7, 2015.
172 Venezuela, Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela, Article 187.
173 Constitución de Venezuela, Article 186.
Additionally, the old PSUV-majority National Assembly illegally filled the Supreme Court with government loyalists between the election and the new Assembly’s installation. The process was unconstitutionally expedited; Venezuelan lawyer and professor José Vicente Haro noted that the accelerated “appointments violated five articles of the Constitution.”175 Once the National Assembly was sworn in, an orchestrated government deadlock ensued: the Executive and the government-loyal Supreme Court repeatedly annulled the National Assembly’s decisions.176 In response, the opposition activated a recall referendum on Maduro’s presidency in October 2016 that the government shut down.177 In March 2017, the Supreme Court found the National Assembly to be in a “situation of contempt” and ruled that all competencies of the Legislative Branch would be transferred to the Court.178 The decision’s glaring infringement on the Constitution’s separation of powers drew major international denunciations and protests, forcing Chavismo to reverse the ruling.179

These blatant violations of constitutional order drew sharp contrasts with Chavismo’s earlier consolidation strategies, which always sought to maintain at least a semblance of legality. Power dynamics, however, had altered too drastically in the last election; Chavismo could no longer operate within the constitutional framework and maintain hegemony. Small-scale strategies of dubious legality were effective at

176 The Venezuelan president does not have veto power but can send laws to the Supreme Court, which can discard them if they are declared unconstitutional.
179 Ibid.
manipulating elections and undermining regional governments, but they could not unobtrusively override or dissolve the National Assembly. Chavismo was now trapped by the same Constitution that gave rise to its competitive authoritarian regime. Faced with this disadvantageous constitutional framework, Chavismo resorted to the alternative, more favorable structures of the Communal State.

After his death, Chávez’s individualistic management and execution of the Communal State project became its greatest weakness. Without Chávez, the future of the project was a mystery. The plans, funding, and resources for Communal State development were never the result of a collective effort; every aspect of the project “was dependent on [Chávez’s] will.” Even during Chávez’s life it was evident that those around him did not truly understand—or invest in—the president’s Communal State project. On 21 October 2012, Chávez held a televised cabinet meeting where he reprimanded his ministers, including Nicolás Maduro, for failing to commit to Communal State development. The president, visibly upset with his ministers, criticized his government’s inadequately sluggish construction of Communes:

Where are the Communes? [...] I once gave a little red book to every minister on the topic of the Communes, but it appears like nobody here read it. [...] The Communes don’t exist. And where are we going to look for them? On the moon? On Jupiter? What are we doing here?

By 2012, the Communal State’s legal framework had almost entirely been codified. However, while Communal Councils had abundantly propagated since

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2006, the development of Communes across the country was lagging. There were only 511 registered at the time, but the government had a six-year plan to construct more than 3,000 Communes, encompassing 70 percent of the population, by 2019.\(^{183}\)

Initially, Maduro did not see the authoritarian value of Communal State development. As López Maya explains, “Communes [were] not linked to macro-level policies nor [had] public services been transferred to them, something that is contemplated in the Organic Law of Communes as part of their self-governance functions.”\(^{184}\) After losing the Nationally Assembly, however, Maduro began using the Communal State as a way to circumvent the constitutional restrictions imposed by an opposition-held National Assembly. Roughly a week after the 2015 election, the government illegally established a parallel “Communal Parliament” comprised of representatives from existing Communes.\(^{185}\) According to official figures, there were a total of 45,000 Communal Councils and almost 1,500 Communes by the end of 2015. After the parallel body was established, Maduro stated he would give “all power to the Communal Parliament.”\(^{186}\) The fact that the Communal State was revitalized in response to the opposition’s victory indicates that the project was revived, above all else, as a mechanism for authoritarian consolidation.

The Communal Parliament, however, despite the “popular power” rhetoric surrounding it, was not an effective alternative to the de jure parliament. The


\(^{186}\) Ibid.
Communal State’s underdevelopment and lack of constitutional legitimacy meant the parallel parliament had little influence or decision-making power beyond the ambit of Communes and Communal Councils, making it a relatively insignificant rival to the National Assembly at the time. Instead, Maduro declared a “state of emergency”\textsuperscript{187} and relied on its repeated extension to bypass the National Assembly’s superintendence.\textsuperscript{188} The Communal State, however, continued to become relevant as a tool for consolidation. As tension between \textit{Chavismo} and the National Assembly escalated between 2016 and 2017, the government began using Communal State structures as explicit mechanisms for social control.

\textbf{Politics of Hunger: Institutionalized Social Control}

While the government struggled to suppress the National Assembly, deteriorating socioeconomic conditions put additional pressure on the regime. The inflation rate exploded over the course of three years, jumping from 111 percent to 930,000 percent between 2015 and 2018.\textsuperscript{189} The severity of food and medicine shortages also intensified. In June 2016, unofficial sources estimated that the shortage of basic food products had reached 80 percent.\textsuperscript{190} Additionally, the Pharmaceutical Federation of Venezuela (\textit{Federación Farmacéutica Venezolana})

\textsuperscript{187} The Venezuelan National Assembly must approve any presidential state of emergency. After its initial rejection by the new parliament, the Supreme Court overrode the decision.\textsuperscript{188} “Estado de excepción y emergencia en Venezuela: qué significa,” \textit{CNN Español}, May 17, 2016.
\textsuperscript{189} International Monetary Fund, \textit{World Economic Outlook: Growth Slowdown, Precarious Recovery}, Washington, DC, April 2018.
\textsuperscript{190} Yohama Carballo-Arias, Jesús Madrid and Marciel C. Barrios, "Working in Venezuela: How the Crisis has Affected the Labor Conditions," \textit{Annals of Global Health} 84, no.3 (2018), 516.
reported that the shortage of medicines had reached 85 percent by January 2017.\textsuperscript{191} As direct result of the economic crisis, Venezuelans’ opportunities for leisure dissipated. For most Venezuelans, especially those of lower socioeconomic class, daily life was reoriented toward finding food and other rationed products. Standing in lines for three hours to obtain scarce goods and taking time off work to find food became common aspects of Venezuelan life.\textsuperscript{192}

Although the socioeconomic crisis negatively impacted government popularity, it also allowed the regime to exploit desperation and hunger to further its authoritarian consolidation. In 2016, Maduro established the Local Committees for Supply and Production (\textit{Comités Locales de Abastecimiento y Producción}, CLAP). The CLAPs are community-based food distribution committees that deliver boxes of subsidized products (i.e. rice, milk, sugar, pasta, etc.) to their community’s households on a monthly basis. In most cases, though, the monthly CLAP boxes are not even enough to cover an average family’s weekly nutritional needs. CLAPs must form around existing Communal Councils and committee members are responsible for surveying each household. Once families register, the Ministry of Popular Power for Food (\textit{Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Alimentación}) delivers the boxes to the community’s CLAP, which then distributes them to each household. Unsurprisingly, the CLAP distribution system is deeply political and committees “identify themselves as \textit{Chavistas}, socialists and government loyalists.”\textsuperscript{193}

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\item \textsuperscript{191} Ferreira Fefarven, “Escasez de medicinas en el país supera 85%,” \textit{El Universal}, April 5, 2016.
\item \textsuperscript{192} Carballo-Arias et al., “Working in Venezuela,” 516.
\end{itemize}
\end{small}
From the start, there were reports of government opponents being excluded from receiving CLAP boxes. One resident recounted to the Wall Street Journal: “I was told very clearly and straight to my face: We won’t sell you the bag of food, this benefit is reserved only for Chavistas.” Even high-ranking government officials acknowledged the political nature of the distribution committees. In July 2016, Vice President Aristóbulo Istúriz said the CLAPs were a “political instrument to defend the revolution.” In response, opposition sectors denounced the CLAPs as part of a “food apartheid” strategy seeking to punish opponents to Maduro’s government with starvation. The presidential decree that created the committees supports this claim, since CLAPs were “assigned functions of surveillance and organization […] to maintain public order and guarantee security and sovereignty in the country.” In other words, the CLAPs had discretion over who received the subsidized food boxes and were part of a concerted attempt at monitoring society.

The CLAPs also reinforced military loyalty, granting special privileges to the Armed Forces with respect to the government’s food distribution networks. In July 2016, Maduro gave the military full control over the country’s food distribution programs, providing additional opportunities for unrestrained corruption. For example, Vladimir Padrino López, top military general and Minister of Defense, directs the Grand Mission of Sovereign Supply (Gran Misión Abastecimiento

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194 Ibid.
196 Zuñiga, “Food apartheid.”
197 Venezuela, Presidential Decree Nº 2323, Decreto de Estado de Excepción y de la Emergencia Económica, in Gaceta Oficial Nº 6227, Caracas, 13 May 2016.
The GMAS is responsible for importing food into the country, which involves managing large amounts of foreign currency that can be easily embezzled. Felipe Pérez, former minister of Chávez’s first government, insists that 80 percent of the imported food products are diverted to benefit the Armed Forces. An investigation by The Associated Press (AP) revealed a “food trafficking” phenomenon in Venezuela involving military-controlled black markets, where subsidized products are resold at 100 times the fixed price. Luis Peña, director of operations at the Caracas-based importer Premier Foods, told AP that he makes payments to “a long list of military officials for every shipment from the United States,” describing the process as “a continuous chain of corruption from the moment the food arrives by ship.”

Another mechanism for social control that the Maduro created to take advantage of the economic crisis was the Carnet de la Patria, or “Fatherland Card.” According to the government, the individualized cards were meant to record “the socioeconomic status of the population and streamline government social assistance programs.” The card, however, includes a digital wallet that is a requirement— not a streamlining device—for access to government assistance programs. The Carnet de la Patria would also document attendance at PSUV events and verify

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198 Bermúdez, “Crisis en Venezuela.”
199 Ibid.
202 Ibid.
203 “Qué es y cómo funciona el carnet de la patria que permitirá seguir comprando gasolina a precio subsidiado en Venezuela,” BBC News Mundo, August 14, 2018.
participation in electoral processes. The collection of citizens’ information and direct link to government programs indicated the card was a form of social exclusion and control that “indirectly registered citizens under the PSUV.”

According to government figures, roughly 16.5 million people—more than half of the population—had signed up for a Carnet de la Patria by January 2018.

Furthermore, the fact that CLAPs were required to form around Communal Councils reflected a new iteration of the Communal State. Communal structures were now entirely an apparatus for distributing goods and money in exchange for concrete political support. Again, it was not until after losing the National Assembly, three years after Chávez’s death, that Maduro reenergized efforts for Communal State development. Unlike municipalities, which had been repeatedly subject to electoral competition in the previous decade, Communes and Communal Councils had always existed under the central government’s influence. This meant that these communal bodies were ideal spaces for the hunger-focused clientelism that underpinned the CLAPs. Without these existing communal governance structures, it is unlikely that Chavismo would have had the necessary societal infrastructure, or institutional reach, to implement such widespread programs for social control. This marked an important shift in the evolution of the Communal State, which had mainly worked to institutionalize clientelism in the past. Once repurposed, however, Communal State structures turned out to be particularly effective entities for further

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204 “Aseguran que el Carnet de la Patria es igual a la lista Tascón,” El Nacional, January 30, 2017.
205 “Qué es el carnet de la patria,” BBC News Mundo.
authoritarian consolidation. By 2016, communal structures were adapted into operational mechanisms for social control.

The CLAPs are a form of discursive power, playing on fear and hunger to “secure the active complicity of the subjects of power in their own self-regulation.” Many desperate Venezuelans struggling to find food for their families would not have many alternatives to CLAP boxes besides starvation. Faced with this harrowing scenario, most would logically choose to opt into the food distribution programs—even if that meant not being able to protest or openly criticize the Maduro government. It was this way that Chavismo weaponized hunger to increase control over society. Because the government was the only entity that could distribute affordable food, it could use the crisis to its advantage by demanding compliance in exchange for baseline food products. In a country experiencing hyperinflation and mass shortages, like Venezuela, the fear of starvation has often outweighed the desire to protest. Chavismo’s monopoly on humanitarian relief and social projects was central to this strategy for social control.

The government also used the Communal State to curb civil society. According to the law, any organizations that operate at a community-level must get approval for their work from the respective Communal Councils. Leandro Buzón is cofounder of the non-profit Caracas Mi Convive, an organization combating violence in Caracas by developing targeted social projects in the capital’s crime hotspots. In order to operate, Caracas Mi Convive had to present to Communal Councils on several occasions. In the parish of El Valle, they had an audience with 113

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spokespeople from the parish’s councils, who agreed to approve *Mi Convive’s* work after hearing their proposal. Buzón explained that, “while there were some sectors [of the city] more concerned with ideology, others were receptive to the true aims of *Mi Convive’s* social projects.”

Under Maduro, however, the government began the process of subordinating all aspects of society to the state. This included limiting the operational capacity of civil society organizations at the local level. After Chávez’s death, Buzón noticed a shift in the PSUV’s influence over the Communal Councils. For example, Pedro Martinez, a communal leader in the Caracas parish of San Agustín, had his position revoked for “not being sufficiently loyal to the PSUV.” In 2014, Buzón and his cofounder Roberto Patiño were invited by a communal leader from San Agustín parish to participate, on behalf of *Mi Convive*, in the Communal Councils’ *mesas de trabajo*. After learning about their presence, Jorge Rodriguez, the PSUV mayor of the municipality, ordered their immediate expulsion due to their personal opposition to the government—they were not operating on behalf of any political party at the time.

*Mi Convive’s* experience in San Agustín is an example of the PSUV’s decisive power over the Communal State. The PSUV’s ability to override communal leaders in this case evidenced the government’s growing dominion over communal institutions. In July 2016, the Ministry for Communes projected heavy losses in upcoming spokespeople elections due to the socioeconomic crisis. In response, the

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207 Leandro Buzón, interview with author, Caracas, December 12, 2018.
208 Ibid.
209 Ibid.
ministry illegally suspended all popular power elections (Communal Councils, Communes, etc.) for 180 days.\textsuperscript{210} The delay was presumably intended to “make sure the [CLAP boxes remained] controlled by the government’s most loyal followers within the Communal Councils.”\textsuperscript{211} The decision flagrantly contradicted the communal project’s theoretical foundation of self-governance and “popular power.” Therefore, it was clear that the Communal State’s clientelistic purpose took on new dimensions after the 2015 National Assembly elections. Maduro’s government used existing communal institutions as a framework for social control that relied on the government’s monopolization of community-level engagement and food distribution.

The strategies for social control enumerated above all launched in 2016, the same year that the opposition-majority National Assembly came to power. Maduro’s government, struggling to delegitimize the National Assembly and realizing its improbability of winning another election, used the socioeconomic crisis to its advantage. Although the regime held full responsibility for the man-made crisis, it was still able to use its infrastructural power to prioritize supporters through the Communal State. Many Venezuelans felt indirect pressure to join these institutions in order to gain access to humanitarian relief. The communal structures, which were already Chavista spaces, were relatively easy to develop into mechanisms for social control. Additionally, by forcing civil society organizations to operate within the ambit of these institutions, the government could begin exerting control over all

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\textsuperscript{211} Ibid.
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aspects of Venezuelan society. These systems, however, remained imperfect. Widespread corruption from military management and accelerated inflation limited the effectiveness of these social control strategies. In 2017, tensions culminated in a series of protests that brought Venezuela to the brink of electoral revolution.

**Failed Electoral Revolution**

While unsuccessful, the 29 March 2017 attempt to transfer all competencies of the National Assembly to the Supreme Court was an explosive catalyst for mass mobilization. The resulting wave of intense anti-government protests lasted for more than four months, with hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans demonstrating on a near-daily basis. On 19 April 2017, the opposition held the “mother of all marches” that filled the streets of Caracas and the rest of the country with Venezuelans against Maduro’s regime. According to Ricardo Ríos of the *Universidad Central de Venezuela*, the march was the largest in the country's history. Venezuelan pollster Meganálisis calculated that 2.5 million people marched in Caracas alone, while an additional 6 million protested in the country's interior. Despite being largely peaceful, the mega marches were met with brutal repression. Throughout the 134-day period of protests, 157 Venezuelans died and more than 1,000 were imprisoned. These prolonged mass mobilizations set the final conditions for electoral revolution.

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Between April and July 2017, each of McFaul’s seven conditions for successful electoral revolution was present in Venezuela. For reference, these are 1) an existing competitive authoritarian regime, 2) an unpopular incumbent, 3) a united opposition, 4) independent electoral-monitoring capabilities, 5) partially independent media, 6) mass mobilizations, and 7) divisions in state security forces.216 The Venezuelan case, however, did not result in democracy. Despite the exacerbated social, economic, and political conditions conducive to democratic transition, Maduro’s government succeeded in thwarting electoral revolution and establishing hegemonic authoritarian rule.

Venezuela between 2016 and 2017 clearly satisfied the first six conditions for electoral revolution. As discussed in previous chapters, starting in 1999, Chávez’s government increasingly relied on quasi-authoritarian maneuvers to consolidate power and debilitate political opposition. Under this semi-autocratic governance, concentrated institutional power repeatedly skewed electoral competition in Chavismo’s favor (competitive authoritarianism). After 2013, Chávez’s death, combined with collapsing oil prices and worsening socioeconomic conditions, led to massive dissatisfaction with Maduro’s government (unpopular incumbent). Additionally, during the 2015 National Assembly elections, the coalition of opposition parties that had failed to defeat Chavismo in the past united to secure a resounding majority in the Venezuelan parliament (united opposition). In spite of the government’s customary electoral machinations and CNE partisanship,

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Venezuela’s automated voting system remained secure. This ultimately guaranteed a baseline of electoral scrutiny that would have demonstrably proven significant fraud (monitoring capabilities). Also, although soft censorship had seriously weakened freedom of the press, the media—especially online sources—still had the capacity to relay information on potential fraud and mobilizations (partially independent media). Finally, the continuous wave of mass protests in 2017 added enormous pressure for democratic transition (mass mobilizations).

The final condition for electoral revolution, however, is less easily discernible. Assumptions on divisions in state security forces at the time can only be extrapolated from contemporary instances of regime fracture. The dissidence of Prosecutor General Luisa Ortega Díaz is an example. Ortega Díaz began her tenure after being appointed by Chávez in 2008; she was then approved for a second term by the Chavista-majority National Assembly in 2014. Despite being a long-time Chavista, Ortega Díaz turned against Maduro’s government after the Supreme Court’s attempt to dissolve the National Assembly:

I consider it an unavoidable historic duty, not only in my capacity as Prosecutor General, but as a citizen of this country, to refer to recent decisions [...] of the Supreme Court of Justice. In these judgments there are several violations of constitutional order and ignorance of the State model enshrined in our Bolivarian Constitution. [...] It is my obligation to express my high concern to the country.

218 Ibid, 143.
As Prosector General, Ortega Díaz had previously been complicit in Maduro’s regime. In 2014, her office was responsible for issuing the indictments and arrest warrants for opposition leader Leopoldo López, who was convicted and sentenced to 13 years in prison after a sham trial. In her denunciations, Ortega Díaz maintained that she was still Chavista, criticizing the perversion of “President Chávez’s Constitution.” Her break with Maduro’s administration was indicative of broader divisions within Chavismo.

Another relevant example of defection was the case of Óscar Pérez, former member of Venezuela’s investigative agency (Cuerpo de Investigaciones Científicas, Penales y Criminalísticas, CICPC). In June 2017, Pérez flew a police helicopter over the Supreme Court and dropped non-lethal stun grenades onto the building as a “wake-up call for the country.” Later that day, he appeared in a video with masked officials, explaining that their “fight [was] not with the rest of the state forces, it [was] against the tyranny of [the] government.” The rebel leader confused the political opposition, which suspected Pérez to be part of a government-organized stunt to justify a crackdown on opponents. At the same time, Maduro denounced the attack as an attempted military rebellion. In January 2018, Pérez and his men were extrajudicially killed in a raid by government forces. Although Pérez’s rebellion did not inspire subsequent defections from the state’s forces, the incident stands as

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222 “Fiscal general: ruptura del orden constitucional,” *CNN Español*.
224 Ibid.
evidence that discontent with Maduro’s regime existed within the government’s security apparatuses.

The cases of defiance by Luisa Ortega Díaz and Óscar Pérez suggest larger divisions within government forces at the time, which still cannot be proven due to lack of public information. In the context of severe socioeconomic collapse and massive government unpopularity, however, it is not surprising that the widespread discontent toward Maduro’s regime spanned into government ministries and the Armed Forces. What is certain, though, is that a decisive contingent of state security forces never turned against the government during this period—despite the plausibility of widespread disaffection. The military’s apparent unity behind Maduro was the payoff from the loyalty incentives implemented after Chávez’s death, especially the deconstruction of the Armed Forces’ chain of command hierarchy. Additionally, the influence of colectivos, the Bolivarian Militia, and other armed Chavista groups further dissuaded military disobedience. Hence, considering the probable mid- and lower-level divisions in state security forces, Venezuela met all seven conditions for electoral revolution between 2016 and 2017.

Against the odds, the Maduro government managed to thwart electoral revolution in 2017. The key to the regime’s consolidation of hegemonic authoritarianism was the 2017 National Constituent Assembly (Asamblea Nacional Constituyente, ANC). On 23 May 2017, Maduro launched plans to hold elections for

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an illegal Constituent Assembly tasked with rewriting the Constitution. An ANC is extraconstititutional by nature, with the power to dissolve institutions and essentially rule by decree while drafting a new *magna carta*. In addition, the government engineered the ANC’s configuration to guarantee a PSUV-majority. As Héctor Briceño from the *Universidad Central de Venezuela* explains, the ANC attempted to solve a “problem the government [had] been avoiding since 2016: How to win elections with 20% (maybe 30%) of the votes? In other words: How to win while losing?”

The extreme gerrymandering of the ANC involved two strategies: allotting a certain number of seats to specific “sectors of society” and disproportionate representation. Of the total 545 seats, 364 were elected based on territorial divisions and 181 based on sectors of society. The eight sectors put forward by Maduro were “indigenous peoples, students, farmers and fishermen, businessmen, handicapped people, communes and workers, pensioners, and communal councils.” Not only do the majority of Venezuelans not fit into any of these categories, the sectors clearly favor institutions with overwhelming *Chavista* influence, like Communal Councils and Communes. Once again, the structures of the Communal State were incorporated into a strategy for authoritarian consolidation.

In this case, the government used the Communal State to build infrastructural...

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227 Héctor Briceño, “Constituyente: reglas manipuladas para ganar con el 20% de los votos; por Héctor Briceño,” *Prodavinci*, May 27, 2017.


229 Briceño, “Constituyente: reglas manipuladas.”
power, creating an omnipotent governance institution that was not subject to true electoral competition.

Additionally, the territorial divisions for the remaining 364 seats heavily biased less populated regions that supported the government. For example, the municipalities of Maroa, Río Negro, and Manapiare, which have a sum total of 7,605 voters between them, each got to elect one member to the ANC, while the municipality of Maracaibo—which has 941,974 registered voters—only elected two ANC members.\(^{230}\) If the 2015 National Assembly election results were repeated under these conditions, the PSUV would have won a majority of the territorially distributed seats in the ANC despite losing by more than two million votes (See Fig. 5). Unsurprisingly, the opposition refused to participate in the election, classifying the unrepresentative Constituent Assembly as another attack on constitutional order.

![Figure 5](Source: Prodavinci)

\(^{230}\) Ibid.
On 30 July 2017, abstention predominated in the ANC elections; the estimated participation rate was between 10 and 20 percent.\textsuperscript{231} The CNE announced participation to be 41 percent, but the multinational company administering the electronic voting system announced that official figures were inflated by at least one million votes.\textsuperscript{232} Additionally, because it was the only major party participating, the PSUV won every seat in the Constituent Assembly. Although mass mobilizations continued until the day of the election, attrition led momentum among protesters to dissipate shortly after the ANC was established.

The Constituent Assembly’s creation marked the failure of electoral revolution and ended the competitive authoritarian era in Venezuela. During its first session, the ANC replaced Prosecutor General Ortega Díaz.\textsuperscript{233} A week later, the body issued an arrest warrant for Ortega Díaz, who fled to Colombia with her husband.\textsuperscript{234} On 18 August 2017, the Constituent Assembly achieved what the Supreme Court had failed to do a few months earlier: assume all functions of the Legislative Branch by dissolving the National Assembly by decree.\textsuperscript{235} Opposition lawmakers refused to recognize the authority of the unelected constituent body and continued to operate as the parliament. All other state institutions, however, ignored the National Assembly’s decisions, recognizing the ANC as the \textit{de facto} parliament. Through the

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\textsuperscript{232} “Smartmatic, la empresa a cargo del sistema de votación en Venezuela, denuncia ‘manipulación’ en la elección de la Constituyente y el CNE lo niega,” \textit{BBC Mundo}, August 2, 2017.

\textsuperscript{233} “Venezuela constitutional assembly fires chief prosecutor,” \textit{Deutsche Welle}, August 6, 2017.

\textsuperscript{234} “Luisa Ortega ‘fearing for her life’ flees to Colombia,” \textit{Al Jazeera}, August 18, 2017.

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ANC, Maduro was finally able to sideline the National Assembly, replacing it with a subservient all-powerful body that freed his regime from constitutional restraints. After the ANC was established, all subsequent elections became uncompetitive. For example, in May 2018, Maduro won reelection after all viable opposition parties were barred from participating. Since August 2017, the Venezuelan regime has operated under hegemonic authoritarianism, where “elections and other ‘democratic’ institutions are largely façades” and opposition forces can “not seriously challenge the regime.”

**Conclusions**

The failure of electoral revolution in Venezuela was rooted in repurposed Chávez-era mechanisms for military control and Communal State structures. Under Maduro, the military gained special access to lucrative ministries and food distribution networks that allowed members to benefit from the PSUV-dominated state. At the same time, the myriad of generals that were promoted after Chávez's death atomized power structures, making military uprisings exceedingly difficult to organize. During the period of mass mobilizations in 2016 and 2017, these military strategies managed to avoid major fissures within the Armed Forces. Additionally, after the 2015 elections, the PSUV struggled to find viable options for consolidation within the constitutional framework. Communal State structures offered the ideal groundwork to hastily organize a party-controlled Constituent Assembly, coerce

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people using starvation, and dissuade dissidence among the most vulnerable sectors of society.

This chapter has demonstrated the pivotal role that post-Chávez alterations to the military and bottom-up consolidation strategies played in thwarting electoral revolution. It also illustrates how Chavismo's methods for political survival in 2016-2017 directly depended on the authoritarian infrastructure provided by these consolidation strategies, which began developing in the early 2000s.
Chapter V: Conclusion

Roughly 60 percent of countries in the world today are classified as electoral democracies, but the stability and future of global democracy remains uncertain.\textsuperscript{238} As Diamond points out, “the world has been in a mild but protracted democratic recession since about 2006.”\textsuperscript{239} An accelerating rate of democratic breakdowns, the deepening of authoritarian regimes, and the declining quality of democracies pose serious concerns for the future of democratic governance.\textsuperscript{240} In the midst of this global democratic recession, understanding how regimes successfully manipulate democratic institutions into authoritarian instruments has taken on increasing relevance. Leaders like Recep Erdoğan in Turkey and Viktor Orbán in Hungary, for example, have recently used institutional advantages to weaken constraints on their power, revealing a worrisome proliferation of authoritarian elements in today’s democratic world.

Examining authoritarian consolidation in Venezuela sharpens our understanding of transitions out of competitive authoritarian regimes. Specifically, the Venezuelan case outlines under what conditions these regimes manage to successfully resist the democratic pressures that have historically been conducive to electoral revolution. It also exposes the political framework available for the Maduro regime’s continued consolidation of authoritarianism. In addition, there are other far-reaching implications for the field of comparative politics; understanding

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Larry Diamond, “Facing Up to the Democratic Recession,” \textit{Journal on Democracy} 26, no.1 (2015), 142.
\item Ibid, 144.
\item Ibid.
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\end{footnotesize}
the evolution of authoritarianism in Venezuela helps identify similar strategies that may lead to the erosion of democracy around the world.

The failure of electoral revolution in Venezuela was the result of piecemeal authoritarian consolidation; that is to say, the gradual implementation of small-scale autocratic reforms and restructurings that sought to protect Chavismo from repeated threats against its hegemony. When aggregated over time, these collective reforms established an authoritarian infrastructure that facilitated the regime’s frustration of electoral revolution in 2016-2017. Examining the myriad of consolidation methods employed by the Chavista government since 1999, two central strategies for authoritarian consolidation emerge: a military strategy and a bottom-up approach.

The military strategy focused on insulating the regime from the threat of mass mobilizations and military uprisings. Securing the Armed Forces’ loyalty developed the government’s despotic power capabilities, facilitating repression and counteracting popular pressure against the regime. In the aftermath of the 2002 coup attempt and national strike, Chávez began the restructuring and ideologization of the Armed Forces as a method of “coup-proofing” his government. During the onset of the post-Chávez socioeconomic crisis, Maduro’s government created additional loyalty incentives by ceding control of lucrative industries and food distribution networks to the Armed Forces, promoting loyalists, and decentralizing the military’s hierarchy. This gave the Armed Forces vested interest in the regime’s survival and deterred organized insurrections. Additionally, the incorporation of armed civilian groups into the state’s security forces (e.g. colectivos and Bolivarian
Militia) divided despotic power among various armed actors, further disincentivizing military rebellion. For these reasons, despite internal divisions, the Armed Forces remained loyal when prolonged mass mobilizations and the exacerbated socioeconomic crisis created an opportunity for electoral revolution in 2016-2017.

The bottom-up approach to authoritarian consolidation is based on community-level engagement and took shape via the Communal State. Soon after their creation in 2006, Communal Councils developed into clientelistic structures that allowed the president to distribute resources directly to communities mainly comprised of his supporters. In 2009, Communal Councils took on additional ideological purpose, as “socialist spaces” for institutionalized mobilization in service of Chavismo. The councils were later adapted into the foundational components of Chávez's Communal State project, which was used to undermine regional governments and centralize power under the Executive. After Chávez’s death, Venezuela’s crippling economic crisis rapidly mounted pressure against the Maduro government, leading the regime to repurpose Communal State structures as mechanisms for social control.

The confluence of Venezuela’s economic collapse and repurposed Communal State entities allowed the regime to control individuals using hunger. In other words, Maduro’s regime took advantage of the humanitarian crisis to make people dependent on the government for food; it then used the Communal State as a vehicle into their communities and homes. Other subsidized food networks and initiatives had already been created under Chávez, these included the state companies
Producción y Distribución Venezolana de Alimentos (PDVAL) and Mercados de Alimentos (Mercal).241 These food distribution systems, however, did not allow for the same level of social control that the CLAPs provided through the Communal State. This strategy used starvation to dissuade individuals from protesting against the government. When mass mobilizations intensified in 2017, the regime used these food networks to mitigate discontent among the country’s most vulnerable sectors of society.

The Communal State also provided Maduro with an alternative framework to the Federal State outlined in the Constitution. After losing control of the National Assembly, the regime struggled to reconsolidate its hegemony using the Supreme Court. The National Constituent Assembly (ANC), however, succeeded where the Supreme Court had failed, successfully circumventing constitutional order and undermining the National Assembly. The ANC crippled the popular momentum generated by the 2017 protests and effectively replaced the National Assembly as de facto parliament. Without the Communal State, the regime would not have had the infrastructure to gerrymander the ANC as easily. Neither would it have been able to maintain its clientelistic networks nor respond as quickly to the prolonged mass mobilizations in 2017. With Communal State structures in hand, the Maduro government needed less time to plan its response, shortening the timeframe for pressures to culminate in regime collapse.

The military and bottom-up strategies for authoritarian consolidation developed gradually under Chávez, dovetailing after his death to establish

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hegemonic authoritarianism through the ANC. The Communal State provided the
discursive and infrastructural capacities to set up the ANC, while the Armed Forces
maintained the despotic power necessary for its unconstitutional establishment.
Hence, despite meeting all seven conditions for electoral revolution in 2017,
Venezuela was unsuccessful in ousting its autocratic government. The Venezuelan
case shows that if divisions in the state’s security forces are not able to adequately
organize and the government has made the population sufficiently dependent on its
regime, then it is possible to thwart electoral revolution.

Contemporary Developments

Since the transition to hegemonic authoritarianism in 2017, the Venezuelan
government has continued to make use of the military and bottom-up strategies
outlined above. As the socioeconomic crisis continues, so does the regime’s hunger-
based coercion. For example, Maduro promised to disburse monetary bonuses
through the Carnet de la Patria (Fatherland Card) to those that voted in the
undemocratic 2018 presidential election.242 These monetary incentives sought to
legitimize Maduro’s fraudulent reelection by increasing voter turnout. In the end,
however, record levels of abstention led the government to inflate the participation
rate anyway.243 Additionally, Carnet de la Patria booths were set up next to polling
stations during the election. Voters who had the card “were encouraged to register
at the booth and were promised special access to food and subsidy bonuses if they

242 Laura Vidal, "Venezuelans fear 'Fatherland Card' may be a new form of social control,"
There were also reports of some voters being turned away at polling stations for not having the *Carnet de la Patria*. In many ways, the CLAPs and *Carnet de la Patria* have continued to develop a system of “food apartheid,” under which those who do not cooperate with the regime are ineligible for government subsidies and food security.

Efforts to further develop the Communal State also appear underway. In December 2018, I interviewed three communal leaders from the Commune *El Arañero de Sabaneta del Siglo XXI* in Ciudad Tiuna. The Commune is located within Caracas’ Fuerte Tiuna military complex, which is among Venezuela’s most famous and robust military bases. *El Arañero* is comprised of 24 Communal Councils and is still in the process of establishing its governing bodies. When asked about the next phases of the Communal State, the communal leaders pointed to the plans outlined by Erika Farías, the PSUV mayor of Caracas. Farías has divided Caracas into eight future Communal Cities that, when combined, will comprise the country’s first Communal Federation. According to the Commune’s representatives, Farías has also transferred control over public transportation commissions and fares to the Commune’s work committees (*mesas de trabajo*). In the current economic and political climate, however, these Communal State initiatives are unlikely to come to fruition anytime soon. Regardless, Farías’ ambitions suggest that the regime will continue to rely on the Communal State’s infrastructure for its social control networks and consolidation efforts.

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244 Vidal, “Venezuelans fear ‘Fatherland Card’ form of social control.”
245 Ibid.
246 Zuñiga, “How ‘Food Apartheid’ is punishing some Venezuelans.”
247 Interview with communal leaders, December 11, 2018.
These interviews also revealed a staggering deterioration of the Communal State’s electoral components. According to the law, Commune and Communal Council leadership positions are subject to electoral competition. El Arañero, however, does not hold electoral processes; instead, leaders “naturally emerge” from the community. As one leader described, “our work is entirely voluntary, we do not get paid for doing this.”\(^{248}\) These “natural leaders,” however, mainly become involved due to their connection to the PSUV. All three of the representatives, for example, proudly identified as Chavistas.

When asked about the party’s dominant role in the Commune, one representative insisted that the PSUV’s influence in the Commune is unavoidable, since “the party is directly involved in community development.”\(^{249}\) Still, no other political parties are allotted representation, which ensures the PSUV maintains decisive influence over the community. In fact, the PSUV’s political mobilization groups, the Hugo Chávez Battle Units (Unidades de Batalla Hugo Chávez, UBCh), are directly in charge of mobilizing El Arañero’s residents during elections and keeping track of those who abstain from voting.\(^{250}\)

Interestingly, though, these interviews also revealed tension between the regime’s military and bottom-up strategies. Two of the communal leaders believed that the power concentrated in the Armed Forces posed the largest threat to the Communal State’s success. They expressed discontent with the military’s “desire to

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\(^{248}\) Ibid.

\(^{249}\) Ibid.

\(^{250}\) Ibid.
control the Commune's resources and zones of influence." 251 One even criticized Chávez for his decision to bestow so much power in the Armed Forces. Therefore, despite their success against electoral revolution in 2017, the military and bottom-up consolidation strategies occasionally come into conflict with each other. Future clashes between these two strategies could lead to instability and regime fragmentation, especially as conditions continue to deteriorate in Venezuela.

The competition for legitimacy between the National Assembly and Maduro reignited earlier this year, when more than 50 countries recognized Juan Guaidó’s claim as Venezuela’s interim president. 252 The opposition’s strategy starting in 2019 has been to incentivize the Armed Forces to turn on Maduro. For example, the National Assembly has passed amnesty laws protecting officers that defend the Constitution by turning on the regime. The most recent attempt at ousting Maduro was a failed military rebellion on 30 April 2019 that the opposition coordinated with officials in the government. Despite alleged support from key sectors in the Armed Forces and the Supreme Court, the plan ultimately fell apart. Again, this evidences the extent to which loyalty incentives continue to hinder transition efforts. 253 However, the military rebellion also suggests serious divisions within the regime that may have the potential to overcome its strategies for consolidation in the future.

251 Ibid.
252 According to Article 233 of the Constitution, the president of the National Assembly becomes the country’s acting president until new presidential elections are held; Juan Guaidó is currently president of the National Assembly.
In conclusion, the military and the Communal State were instrumental in the Venezuelan regime’s resistance to electoral revolution in 2016-2017. Two years later, these strategies for authoritarian consolidation are still in effect. It is unclear, though, if these will be enough to sustain the regime going forward, especially considering recent evidence of internal divisions and growing international pressure against Maduro’s government.
Appendix: 2015 National Assembly Election Images

Ballot for 2015 National Assembly Elections (Aragua State)
Lower left part of the 2015 Aragua State ballot showing the opposition (MUD-Unidad) and Chavismo-aligned MIN-Unidad with the same candidate names.

MIN-Unidad’s “We are the Opposition” propaganda in Caracas.
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Venezuela. Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela.

“Venezuela dice NO: 6 razones para el NO,” Así No (1999), Venezuela Subject Collection, Box 1, Folder 6, Hoover Institution Archives.


Images

Figure 1. González Marregot, Miguel. “¿Qué es el estado comunal? Descentralización, centralismo, federalismo.”


Figure 5. Briceño, Héctor. “Constituyente: reglas manipuladas para ganar con el 20% de los votos.” Prodavinci. May 27, 2017.