

# Neighborhood Associations in Venezuela: "*Los Vecinos*" Voice Their Dissent

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## Abstract

The legitimacy of the Venezuelan democratic system has been increasingly challenged by different sectors of society alienated by traditional forms of political organization. The newly-elected government that took office on 2 February 1994 encountered a civil society in search of alternative means of representation and participation that no longer conform to the structures and processes that have functioned since 1958. This study describes and assesses the struggle of one such group, neighbors in urban neighborhood associations, that has felt impotent since its development in 1961, but that in the last few crisis contexts that have arisen, has demonstrated its increasing effectiveness as a political power base.

## Introduction

On 2 February 1994, Rafael Caldera was inaugurated for the second time as Venezuela's eighth democratically elected president in 36 years.<sup>1</sup> Campaigning against corruption, poverty and the neoliberal economic policies implemented by the previous administration, the 78-year-old Caldera won the presidency with only 30 percent of the popular vote, even though he had been supported by an eclectic group of small political parties of both right and left. The elections which took place on 6 December 1993 to elect national and state legislatures, were also marked by a record 40 percent abstention rate and the humiliating defeat of the two major traditional parties that had dominated Venezuelan politics since 1958: *Acción Democrática* (AD), the social democratic party, and the *Comité Para Organización Política y Elecciones Independientes* (COPEI), the social Christian party which Rafael Caldera founded in the early 1940s.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to his first term in office, Caldera encountered a country in which 75 percent of its 20 million people are under the age of 40, over 90 percent literate, and 87 percent urban (OCEI 1992); an economy in recession with an all-time inflation rate recorded at 46 percent in 1993; a weak currency (boUvar) which in 1993 alone lost 26 percent of its value against the US dollar; and a financial system in shambles after the failure and takeover by the government of the second largest commercial bank on 17 January 1994.<sup>3</sup> He was also confronted with high levels of unemployment and underemployment, worsening levels of inequality amongst the "haves" and the "have nots," as well as critical levels of poverty, malnutrition and crime, especially in urban areas such as metropolitan Caracas (CEPAL 1992).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, he encountered a citizenry that had vigorously protested market reforms undertaken since February of 1989 and that seemed to have lost faith in the capacity of traditional political parties and the state apparatus to tackle corruption and protect their interests. To borrow David Slater's (1985) language, the accentuated skepticism towards established political parties, the inefficiency of the [end p. 1] state apparatus, and the steadily eroding legitimacy of the state had intensified and deepened the alienation of the majority of Venezuelans.

Caldera faced a civil society searching for alternative means of political representation and participation that lay outside the systems of social and political control that had existed since 1958: Venezuelan neighbors (*vecinos*), neighborhood associations (*Asociaciones de Vecinos*) and the neighborhood movement (*Movimiento Vecinal*) were such alternatives. What follows is an attempt to illustrate their struggle.

## THE BACKGROUND

To understand the rise of new social and political movements in Venezuela requires an analysis of the evolution of the current systems which they are trying to improve and reform.<sup>5</sup>

At the turn of the present century, Venezuela's future looked exceedingly bleak. Devastated by violence, and ruled by caudillos for most of the period after Independence, its prospects for economic growth and political development were among the most dismal in Latin America. Until the 1920s, the country's economy was predominantly agricultural, most of the people lived in rural areas, and the vast majority were illiterate.<sup>6</sup> Between 1830 and 1935, the country experienced 138 minor political uprisings and 32 major coup attempts, 13 of which were successful (Blank 1973). The political game of the oligarchy was that of ensuring personal gain of its members, and the vast majority of the population was denied any participation in politics and in the affairs of the nation.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the growth of the Andean states and their accumulation of wealth, population and power, brought about by the coffee-export economy they had promoted, gave rise to what historians have referred to as the "Andean Hegemony."<sup>7</sup> From Cipriano Castro, who "conquered" Venezuela in 1899, to Isaias Medina Angarita, who was overthrown by a coup d'etat in 1945, Venezuelan politics were dominated by the "Men of the Andes." One of these men, Lieutenant (later General) Juan Vicente Gómez, was to become one of the most---if not *the* most---ruthless of dictators. After overthrowing Cipriano Castro in 1908, Gómez seized a country that for 27 years knew little else but the name Gómez, "El Generalísimo." The country was run as his personal ranch and he ruthlessly filled the jails with his political enemies. "Gomecismo" lasted until the death of "El Generalísimo" in 1935.

Here, it is important to recall some of the significant developments during the 27-year dictatorship of Gómez because they were to have tremendous impacts in the country's later efforts to bring about socio-economic as well as political changes. First and foremost was his ability to achieve a concentration of power that had been previously unknown to Venezuela. His army was able to impose national integration by eliminating the various caudillo-militias in the regions. His autocratic and ruthless regime was able to unify the country politically and administratively to the extent that the country's post-colonial heritage of regional conflict and civil war was effectively eliminated. It was during his dictatorship that oil was first discovered and exploited. The revenues flowing from this resource afforded him the means to crush any opposition to his regime and to further centralize power. Moreover, not only did he consolidate an effective national army, but he eradicated traditional political parties, and developed a new bureaucratic structure.<sup>8</sup>

The discovery of oil, and the development of the oil industry reshaped the social composition of Venezuela. New classes and social formations began to emerge and the urban centers began to attract ever more migrants who sought to benefit from the opportunities in the expanding bureaucracy and oil industry. Nonetheless, despite this social mobilization and periodic bursts of opposition, the regime remained harshly repressive. In April of 1928, a group of young military officers and students from the Central University of Venezuela (UCV) located in Caracas attempted a coup against the regime, but they were brutally defeated.<sup>9</sup> Paradoxically, their defeat marked the emergence from the student groups of a new strategy for political action: mass organization as the most viable means of political change.

Gómez died in 1935 leaving behind a country in which political parties were nonexistent and popular organization was rare. A tradition of political struggle, except for those in the universities, was lacking. While the country's petroleum enclave primarily benefitted external investors, the reformists of 1928 that had seen their demands crushed by [end p. 2] Gómez, languished in jails or in exile. His death represented the birth of the country's contemporary political development.

Gómez's successor was his war minister, General Eleazar López Contreras. While his regime was authoritarian, he tried to avoid the extremes of revolution and despotism. Political amnesty was proclaimed and the country's first political party---*Movimiento de Organización Venezolana*(ORVE)--was established by the reformists of 1928, many of whom had just returned from exile. ORVE soon became the *Partido Democrático Nacional* (PDN) under the leadership of Rómulo Betancourt. Eventually, the PDN was outlawed by López Contreras for instigating a general strike of petroleum workers in December of 1936, forcing it into clandestine activities. This event marked the beginnings of politicized associations of all kinds under PDN's auspices. Amongst such associations were juntas pro-fomento which, as will be seen below, were the predecessors of contemporary neighborhood associations.

At the end of his term in 1941, López Contreras chose as his successor his war minister, General Isaias Medina Angarita. During his term in office, an array of parties became legally organized, including the Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV). The leaders of PDN, who had been operating underground since 1936, emerged and formally constituted a new party in September 1941 called *Acción Democrática* (AD). According to its leader Rómulo Betancourt, "the leadership of AD established for itself the watchword: 'not a single district, not a single municipality without its party organization ", (Levine 1973, 28).<sup>10</sup> The party began an organizational campaign which involved industrial and peasant unions, student groups, women's fronts and every movement or organization that could potentially help the party's cause. Importantly, and included by name, were the *juntas pro-fomento* in the *barrios* of Caracas. As will be seen below, the barrios had developed as informal settlements at or beyond the margins of formal municipalities by rural emigrants. By 1945, AD dominated popular organizations and had become the prominent political party in Venezuela.

Despite Medina Angarita's reforms, the system still restricted political participation. His government responded too late to the growth of political organizations in rural and urban areas. As a result, AD supporters found it necessary to form an alliance with junior military officers to stage a coup to remove him from power in 1945. A junta composed of independent civilians, military officers and AD leaders ruled until 1947.

Between 1945 and 1948, under the leadership of AD, Venezuela witnessed the definitive introduction of democratic principles into its political life: experimentation with representative government; expansion for the first time of all kinds of services to poor and peripheral groups and regions; mobilization and politicization of the peasants and urban workers; and free party organization which included the founding in 1946 of two political parties which became fierce challengers to AD's hegemony: *Unión Republicana Democrática* (URD) and the *Comité Para Organización Política y Elecciones Independientes* (COPEL). A new Constitution was drafted in 1947 which provided for universal suffrage. Under the provisions of this Constitution, presidential and congressional elections took place for the first time in Venezuela. The dominant party, AD, won by a landslide and Rómulo Gallegos was elected President.

The success of AD and its hegemony over the political system alienated important sectors of society such as the church, the military, the business sector and the two major opposition parties, URD and COPEL. Confident in the support of its mass base and its alliance with the military, AD offered little incentive of its own to cooperation and compromise with other parties. Its government succumbed through its own immaturity to a military coup on 24 November 1948, sending the leaders of the democratic experiment once more to jail or to exile. For the next ten years, AD leaders realized that the vast electoral majorities of the 1940s had created a false sense of confidence that had made the party ignore the importance of seeking alliances with other sectors of society. Moreover, those sectors who had supported the coup began to feel the heavy hand of the dictator, Marcos Pérez Jiménez, and began to reevaluate their strategies. As a result, a dialogue was initiated amongst leaders of all political parties and other sectors of society who had seen their hopes for change repeatedly dashed since 1928.

Pérez Jiménez increasingly faced an opposition that collectively denounced the violation of [end p. 3] Venezuelan social and economic rights by the repressive and corrupt regime. Antagonisms between the parties gave way to a united effort to overthrow the regime. Following the fall of Pérez Jiménez on 23 January 1958, the leaders of the incipient political parties adopted a policy of consultation and cooperation that to some extent has persisted to the present.

A landmark of such consultation was the signing of the Pact of Punto Fijo on 31 October 1958, in which the three major political parties --AD, COPEI, and URD--agreed to form a government of national unity, notably excluding the Communist Party of Venezuela. The core agreements of the pact were to support democracy; to bond together to resist challenges to its legitimacy from the extreme right or the extreme left; to strive in general to institutionalize politics, channeling participation within democratic means, and to respect elections. Elite concerns were dominated by political issues and the search for operative codes of coexistence. The 1961 Constitution, still in force today, embodies many of these concepts and, in contrast with the one drafted in 1947, focuses on the creation of a viable and stable democracy that devotes considerable attention to creating equitable and workable political procedures. To a large degree, the Pact of Punto Fijo has guided Venezuela's political system for the past 36 years.

### **DEMOGRAFIC VENEZUELA and *LOS VECINOS***

From a historical perspective, and given Venezuela's history of violence and military rule since independence, it is no small accomplishment that Venezuelans have been able to elect eight consecutive presidents since 1958, in an area of the world plagued by political turbulence for most of the twentieth century. The agreements to build consensus that emerged from the Pact of Punto Fijo created a system that so far has, for better or for worse, managed the conflicts that have arisen, proving the ability of the system and traditional political actors to cope with stress. Having said that, however, it must be recognized that the political institutions and the state apparatus have failed to keep pace with the growth and development of civil society in the last 36 years. As a result, strengthening of the system has not been achieved. Despite having had the vast resources which emanated from oil exports for most of the 1970s,<sup>11</sup> and having successfully defeated subversive activity during the 1960s, the system and its main actors (especially political parties and economic elites) have remained hostile to change, even when confronted with the critical events of the 1990s.<sup>12</sup> As a result, a high degree of political *compadrazgo* and clientelism still characterizes most sectors of society and the state apparatus appears as a huge populist machine ruled by and for political parties and interests. The social revolt of February 1989, the two attempted coups of 1992, and the removal from office of Carlos Andrés Pérez in May 1993 are the latest in a series of symptoms which suggest that the system has not been able to keep pace with the new realities facing Venezuela as it approaches the twenty first century.<sup>13</sup> It was within this environment of political party control, centralism, political clientelism and populism, and deteriorating economic and social conditions that *Los Vecinos* initiated the search for alternative means of representation and participation.

Although it is common to think of neighborhood associations and the neighbors' movement as having originated shortly after the fall of Pérez Jiménez in 1958, a more careful study shows that *vecinos* in Venezuela had indeed organized as early as 1936, principally in the metropolitan area of Caracas.<sup>14</sup> After the fall of Gómez the *barrios* of Caracas,<sup>15</sup> that had seen a rapid increase in population due to rural emigration, found it necessary to organize in order to demand goods and services which had not been previously provided via municipal authorities. The first forms of neighborhood organizations called *juntas pro-fomento* (pro-development boards) date from 1936. Such organizations were also known as *juntas comunales* or *comités pro-mejoras*. These forms of organizations in the *barrios* of Caracas were the historical antecedents of the contemporary neighborhood associations and neighbors' movement.

How can the emergence of contemporary neighborhood associations and the neighbors' movement be best

explained? The 1961 Constitution, adopted after the fall of the dictatorship, and still in force, clearly outlined citizens rights previously unknown to Venezuelans. They included the rights of housing, free education, work, health care, and the protection of children. It also [end p. 4]



*Source:* Asociación de Vecinos-Urbanización Santa Monica (Asove Monica). Caracas, 1993

**"El derecho al agua no se mendiga: se pelea!"**

established for the first time the need to promote the growth and development of the national economy in which the state was to play a major role. From its inception, the central government was to play the dominant role in the economic and political development of the country. This is illustrated by the fact that the Constitution does not recognize municipal power, but instead treats municipalities as just another component of the political and territorial division within the new political system. Economically, Venezuela's dependence on oil accentuated in the 1960s to the point that the agricultural sector, the bread and butter of the economy until 1936, began to slowly decay to the point of becoming almost an insignificant source of revenue by the mid-1980s.<sup>16</sup> As a result, the exodus from rural to urban areas intensified.

The municipal councils became mere extensions of the central government and the dominant political parties and did not develop viable plans to control and cope with the consequences of urban ward migration. Many cities, particularly the capital Caracas, experienced unprecedented growth beyond the control of any kind of urban planning.<sup>17</sup> The councils acquired almost absolute power over urban policy and the destiny of their residents. The interest of political parties and those of their supporters inevitably prevailed since the municipal councils were under their control. This resulted in an urban growth financed by the oil boom and void of any kind of control: barrios, shopping malls, high-rise buildings and industrial plants proliferated; existing urban regulations were ignored and zoning codes were changed to satisfy personal and economic interests. Not surprisingly, public services, already deficient at the time, worsened. In sum, leaders of the young democracy established a civil society fundamentally dependent on the center and on political parties, in which any of the rights guaranteed by the Constitution had to be mediated and

exercised through the government apparatus and the parties.

In 1961, in response to the early performance of the young democracy, neighborhood associations emerged, primarily in middle-class neighborhoods located in the eastern part of Caracas. These neighborhoods rapidly became conscious of the problems that the new system was creating for their surroundings and their quality of life. As a founding member of the very first neighborhood association on record stated:

... we founded ARUFLO in 1961 out of an essential necessity to protect the neighborhood and our quality of life ... [the] young democracy was in the hands of the only type of group organization which existed at the time, the political parties ... [especially AD] ... [they] dominated all levels of government ... if you didn't belong to the party you had no negotiation power, no voice ... it was as if we didn't exist ... not very different from the dictatorship that had ruled the country until 1958. Looking at what was happening in the municipal council and the power the political parties had over it, which was being exercised over our community, we got together to discuss what was taking place in front of our own eyes ... we asked ourselves, where are we in this process? Why isn't our voice being heard? What are they doing to strengthen democracy and to elicit our participation? ... we then created the first neighborhood association with very clear objectives ... we wanted to actively participate at the local level to influence policies affecting our space ... we wanted to keep the government and political parties' intervention in our community in check.<sup>18</sup>

ARUFLO was founded as a response to the early signs of centralism, clientelism, populism and inefficiency shown by the municipal council of Petare-which had jurisdiction over the neighborhood-and the early signs of control by political parties over the affairs of the neighborhood. ARUFLO's consolidation encountered serious obstacles, including the opposition by some members of the community who did not understand the purpose of its creation and from the municipal council whose leadership suspected that rival political parties were working behind the scenes.<sup>19</sup> [end p. 5]

Its creation marked the birth of neighborhood associations and the neighbors' movement in Venezuela. Inspired by the experience of ARUFLO, the 1960s and the 1970s witnessed the proliferation of neighborhood associations in Caracas and across the country.<sup>20</sup> As of January 1993, there were 1,167 in the metropolitan area of Caracas alone (Table 1 ) and an estimated 10,000 throughout the country.<sup>21</sup>

TABLE 1. METROPOLITAN AREA OF  
CARACAS: NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATIONS  
(NA) BY MUNICIPALITIES

| Municipality  | Population       | % of<br>Country's<br>Population | NA           |
|---------------|------------------|---------------------------------|--------------|
| Libertador    | 1,963,810        | 11.0                            | 821          |
| Chacao        | 72,444           | 0.4                             | 24           |
| Sucre         | 542,396          | 3.0                             | 240          |
| Baruta        | 269,770          | 1.4                             | 52           |
| El Hatillo    | 49,596           | 0.3                             | 30           |
| <b>Total:</b> | <b>2,898,016</b> | <b>16.1</b>                     | <b>1,167</b> |

*Sources:* OCEI (1992); Office of the President's Commissioner for Relations with Neighborhood Associations; Escuela de Vecinos de Venezuela; Division of Organization and Development of the Community, Mayor's Office, municipality of Libertador; Office for Neighbors' Participation, municipalities of Sucre and Baruta; Mayor's Office, municipality of El Hatillo.

According to Elías Santana (1983), the role of neighborhood associations is three-fold. First, they should regulate and promote vecinos' participation; second, they should foster new dynamics in the relations between the neighborhood and local authorities, maintaining their independence from political parties' domination and government or private control; and third, they should be the source of empowering the localities. Such empowerment, according to Santana, opens up possibilities for neighbors to participate in the decision-making process of policies that directly affect their lives and their communities.

The growth of neighborhood associations in the 1960s and 1970s was first experienced primarily in middle

and upper-middle class *urbanizaciones* in the eastern part of Caracas due to a) their first-hand experience of the uncontrolled growth of the city and b) they were, for the most part, inhabited by professionals and others with a certain degree of education and knowledge regarding the law and the rights supposedly guaranteed by the new Constitution. After 1965, coinciding with the creation of the Service Center for Public Action,<sup>22</sup> the first neighborhood associations were established in lower-income sectors of the city, replacing in many instances previous forms of organizations in existence since 1936, particularly in the barrios.<sup>23</sup> Their struggle, however, differed (as it does today) from those of the *urbanizaciones*. While associations such as ARUFLO were formed to solve problems of urban decay, those in lower-income areas focused on demands for basic needs: property titles for land-holdings, housing, electricity, potable water, sewage systems, and the like. Such an important differentiation in the scope of struggles created from the start a division in the neighborhood movement along class lines. Moreover, it has rendered lower income neighborhoods more susceptible to the intervention of political parties: their struggle, from the start, directly addressed issues totally under the control of the centralized and populist state apparatus controlled by the parties. Today, such intervention exists in many associations of barrios and *urbanizaciones* across the country, although many have managed to confront it and reject it.<sup>24</sup>

The growth of neighborhood associations in the 1960s and 1970s was also slow due in part to the lack of experience in community organization in most of the country and the efforts of political parties to prevent the emergence of alternative means of organization and participation. Even those that were successfully established in the 1960s in middle-class areas of Caracas, lacked a central coordinating unit. Moreover, their activities remained confined to their specific neighborhoods. As a result, cooperation and coordination amongst the associations was weak. In 1971, in an effort to address the lack of coordination and increase cooperation, a group of neighborhood associations from *urbanizaciones* in the eastern part of Caracas unified forces and created the *Federación de Asociaciones de Comunidades Urbanas* (FACUR). FACUR's main goal was to create a bloc able to deal more effectively with local governments in matters of urban planning and to promote neighborhood participation. Although FACUR has been accused throughout the years of allowing political parties to interfere in its internal affairs and [end p. 6] of remaining an elitist and bourgeois federation (Santana 1983), it is agreed that its creation and early activities are a landmark in the Venezuelan neighborhood movement. FACUR was the first federation of its kind able to articulate the goals of the movement beyond the "neighborhood" and beyond Caracas. The scope of the movement began to spread and beginning in 1976 a massive media campaign was launched to promote the activities of the neighbors in Caracas and throughout the country.

As the urban, ecological and economic crisis worsened in Caracas in the mid-1970s and early 1980s, the activities of the neighborhoods increased and began to be felt in all sectors of society. The neighborhood associations, through FACUR, began to demand publicly institutional reforms at the local and national level and the recognition of participation as an essential component of democratic governance. Those demands included (Santana 1983):

- i) municipal elections to be held every three instead of five years and separate from national elections
- ii) direct elections of members of the municipal councils via popular vote and not through political party committees or *planchas*
- iii) empowering council members to try one another if suspected of corruption or any unlawful conduct
- iv) the restructuring of local governments to include the creation of the post of mayor in order to differentiate the "national" from the "local" and to clarify jurisdictions
- v) the legalization of neighborhood associations, and
- vi) that neighbors' participation be promoted, supported and legally recognized by the central government

Such demands represented a landmark in the neighbors' struggle to create new channels of participation, representation and organization in Venezuela's democratic history. The importance of such demands was recognized in 1976 when the magazine *Resumen* chose "Los Vecinos" as its *personajes del año* (persons of the year). To a large extent, such recognition legitimized the activities of the neighborhood residents, their associations and the entire grassroots movement in the eyes of Venezuelans. As a result, associations and federations proliferated and the neighbors' movement expanded. Amongst the most active in the metropolitan area of Caracas were *El Movimiento de Integración de la Comunidad* (MIC) in 1976; the *Coordinadora de Asociaciones de Vecinos del Cafetal* (CORACAFE) in 1979; *La Escuela de Vecinos* in 1980, and more recently, in 1989, the *Coordinadora Nacional de Federaciones de Asociaciones de Vecinos* (CONFEEVECINOS), which incorporates federations representing 19 different regions of the country.<sup>25</sup>

After almost seventeen years of struggle and demands by Los Vecinos, Congress passed the Organic Law of Municipal Government (LORM) on 9 August 1978.<sup>26</sup> The passing of this law represented the first indication that the government had taken notice of the growth of the movement. Until 1978, neighborhood associations had existed *de facto*. Under Title X of the new Law, neighborhood associations obtained legal status. They were also, for the first time, allowed to propose new regulations and bylaws regarding urban planning and to demand their reconsideration when such legislation had already been approved. The new Law also provided for zoning regulations, the protection of green and recreation areas, and the recognition of the rights of neighbors to vote in instances in which zoning had to be changed or modified. The Law, however, left open the possibility to negate this right if zoning changes were ordered by the executive branch of government.<sup>27</sup>

Nonetheless, such official recognition also meant that the government and political parties felt threatened by the alternative means of organization and participation that were emerging, leading to an attempt to try to guide and control their growth and to co-opt them into political parties. Lawmakers ignored many of the demands that neighbors had been voicing since 1963.

Although they had achieved legal status, *Los Vecinos* felt that the new Law only paid lip service to their rights as neighbors and citizens and to their demands for restructuring local government. During March 1979, as their struggle intensified, Congress passed Partial Regulation No. 1 of the 1978 Municipal Law regarding neighborhood associations (Rodríguez García 1988). Such regulation provided mechanisms of control for their creation and actions. Of utmost importance was Article 15 which established the figure of a Commissary which would have "unlimited rights of inspection over the association" over and above the general assembly. As a 70-year-old, who in 1989 became the first President's Commissioner for Neighbors' Affairs, and who has been a neighbor leader for 34 years stated:

... in retrospect, the political parties and the government could not conceive of the idea of granting us any more power ... the fact that Congress had passed the municipal law in 1978 was already worrisome to some of those that had monopolized local power we were not just making noise, we were making sense we were beginning to educate people as to the true meaning of democracy, of participation ... they tried to silence us in 1979 by enacting the Partial Regulation to the Law ... Today, it almost looks natural that they tried to legally control and co-opt our actions ... that's the way they had operated since 1945 ... the figure of the Commissary was an excellent chance for them to control our affairs ... it was a well-designed and premeditated move by AD and COPEI ... the figure of the Commissary would allow them to infiltrate a party member into the associations to oversee, regulate and control our actions ... we were outraged ... it was a move reminiscent of Gómez ... that is the only way they knew and know how to deal with citizens' demands ... they have always been obsessed with control ...<sup>28</sup>

The answer by Congress and the Executive branch to neighbors' demands was clearly perceived as a mockery. AD and CaPEI created "phantom" associations and federations geared toward gaining control of the movement. The best known were Integración Comunal (IC) (AD) and the Federación de Asociaciones de Vecinos (FAVEC) (CaPEI) (Grupo Praxis 1983). From that moment on, neighborhood associations continued their campaign to reform the new Law, adding to their struggle the effects the economic crisis of the 1980s was having in the affairs of the localities and the nation. Such crisis conditions reinforced the need to reform local government and increase participation of the neighbors in their own affairs. As a leader stated:

"It was clear to us in late 1979 that the government and political parties were out to co-opt us ... [that] is the reason why they passed the municipal law and its Partial Regulation. I don't think they believed we were serious and would keep up the fight ... what was important to us was not necessarily the legalization of the associations ... that was just more bureaucracy, more paper work ... we were more concerned in legitimizing the associations and the movement in the localities, in the country. We wanted to be legitimate without obtrusive laws limiting the scope of our actions.<sup>29</sup>

The outcome of the continued struggle was a document produced by the *Movimiento de Integración de La Comunidad* (MIC) in 1982 entitled "We want more democracy."<sup>30</sup> Guided by the principle that democracy had stalled and it had only benefitted a minority of the citizenry, the document consisted on fifteen demands geared toward strengthening representation and participation at the local and national levels. They included those demands articulated in the mid-1970s (items i-vi listed above) plus a call for the repeal of the 1979 Partial Regulation of the municipal law, to be replaced by one which would emanate directly from the neighbors.

Once again, the neighbors had shown their discontent with the efforts undertaken by lawmakers to promote participation, legitimize neighborhood associations, and reform local government. The struggle continued for most of the 1980s and in 1989, the 1979 municipal law was modified to include the election of mayors, as well as members of the municipal councils, through a direct and secret vote in elections that would take place every three years beginning in December 1989 (Virtuoso 1989). The neighbors had in principle achieved wrested autonomy for the municipalities from the control of political party committees (*planchas*) and the central government.

On 22 November 1990, by Presidential decree No. 1297, the 1979 Partial Regulation was repealed and replaced by Partial Regulation No.1 of the new Municipal Law, "Regarding Local Participation" (FACUR 1991). After almost a decade, the neighbors had set a precedent in the struggle for more representation, organization and participation; for the first time, a law had been enacted after extensive consultation with the community, and written by the neighbors and their associations in Caracas and throughout the country. Title II of the new Regulation and its thirty articles concern the creation and operation of neighborhood associations. Articles 20, 26 and 28 are of significance because respectively they a) delegate the maximum authority to the associations' general assembly; b) protect the associations from political party intervention; and c) guarantee the right to participate in councils' sessions and hearings with the mayor on matters related to the communities and neighborhoods that they represent. **[end p. 8]**

## Conclusions

The emergence of neighborhood associations and the neighbors' movement in Venezuela represents one of the most significant developments in the country's democratic history. Working against a centralist, populist and paternalistic tradition, Los Vecinos in Venezuela continue in the struggle to build a more just and representative civil society. In 1994, the neighbors find themselves at a crossroads. Despite the victories

won in matters of legality and legitimacy over the last 30 years, the neighbors and their movement face increasing challenges from a society hard-hit by a recession where most of the population remains skeptical of any kind of political, social or economic organization. These challenges include:

- a) The need to consolidate the movement. To date, most of the achievements have come from a very small number of neighborhoods and associations, mostly from middle- and uppermiddle sectors of society. The division along class lines observed in the early days of the movements has intensified due to worsening economic conditions. Moreover, levels of participation in most associations is low, with initiatives and decisions coming from a small percentage of vecinos.
- b) The need to translate local action from the grassroots of the neighborhood to the national arena to effectively address the social, political and economic problems affecting the entire country. The movement needs to promote and create new relationships with other groups (including old and new political parties) while at the same time maintaining its autonomy and *raison d'etre* at the local level and its credibility as an alternative channel of social and political participation.
- c) The need to identify the role that neighborhoods might play in the political arena in the future. In its present state, the movement is unable to address most of the economic and social issues affecting the entire country because they lie outside its jurisdiction; as a result, the movement is unable to provide solutions eagerly awaited by the citizenry at large.
- d) The relation and interaction with political parties. The neighborhood movement cannot afford to succumb to the power of traditional parties which can be expected to try to manipulate the electorate and penetrate the movement, especially at a time when their legitimacy is eroding. Nor can they afford to be overcome by the frustration produced by the lack of political will shown so far by all traditional political and economic institutions which see the empowerment of the neighborhood residents as a threat to their interests.<sup>31</sup>
- e) The need to educate Venezuelans to become not only good neighbors but good citizens. In stimulating enthusiasm for grassroots neighborhood action, there exists the danger of creating an increased sense of localism and parochialism amongst neighbors so that they are unable (or unwilling) to think beyond the limited horizon of their own neighborhood turf. Whether good neighbors make good citizens remains unclear.

To face these challenges in the 1990s and on into the next century, the neighborhood voices of dissent in Venezuela will need to continue the search for effective alternative modes of representation and participation. Their success in the future will depend on their ability to harmonize their voices and to deepen their commitment to the democratic project they foster. The election of Rafael Caldera represented the end of what was probably the most turbulent five-year presidential period in Venezuela's young democratic history.<sup>32</sup> It also represented the coming to power of the last leader who actively fought dictatorships for over 30 years and was an integral member of the writing and adoption of the Pact of Punto Fijo in 1958. But Los Vecinos are part of a new generation that has experienced the failures of democracy since 1958, that has suffered from the neglect of the central government. But the future, as Oropeza has warned (1983, 97), will depend directly on the capabilities and political skill of new leaders, Venezuelans with new visions of the democratic process, of the new roles that must be given to people at the local level. As a leader of one of Caracas' neighborhood associations states:

... we are in the midst of a process of transition, of transformation ... the so called crisis is in fact a process of change, part of a historical evolution ... the future of our democracy, as imperfect as it has been, depends on the political will of those in power and our ability to make our voices heard and propose feasible solutions ... [but] they **[end p. 9]** are not necessarily mutually exclusive ... I believe that our historical process will, in the long run, show a correlation with our biological process as a nation, as citizens, as leaders, as neighbors ... the biological cycle of the generation of the Pact of Punto Fijo has come to an end ... we need

readjustments in this new cycle that has begun ... readjustments able to cope with our new realities ... we, *Los Vecinos*, are an integral part of that process.<sup>33</sup>

This new beginning, the first haltering steps towards a new Venezuelan reality, a Venezuela in which people in communities take power from the center and provide for their own needs and desires, will undoubtedly necessitate political experimentation, and potential social and economic difficulties. But if the result is the formation of a new citizenship, then such a price is one that the vast majority of Venezuelans will undoubtedly be willing to pay.<sup>34</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Rafael Caldera's first term in office was 1969-1974.

<sup>2</sup> Due to an internal crisis in COPEI which escalated after the social revolt of February 1989, Caldera disassociated himself from the party he had founded. His disciple and fearless adversary, Eduardo Fernández, took over COPEI's leadership.

<sup>3</sup> For a chronological analysis of the government take over of the Banco Latino and the state of the Venezuelan financial sector see daily accounts in the *Financial Times*, January 15th through the 25th, 1994.

<sup>4</sup> According to the Economic Commission for Latin America, 40.5 percent of all Venezuelans live in conditions of poverty. Of that 40.5 percent, 36.6 percent of the population live in "extreme poverty" (CEPAL 1992).

<sup>5</sup> The "'neighbors' movement" is just one of these movements. Others include the environmental, workers, women's, students, professional associations, small entrepreneurs, street vendors and native population movements, to mention but a few. Of course, these movements do not exist in isolation and in many instances combine their efforts in dealing with the state and its bureaucracy. Note that I use the terms "improve" and "reform." My research in Caracas showed that these groups were committed to the democratic project defined in terms of equal representation and participation and not in terms of the current "dictatorship," where only a few participate and benefit. In the case of the "neighborhood movement," active actors whom I met and interviewed did not necessarily favor the implementation by force of any kind of authoritarian rule. Ironically and without exception, they expressed great admiration and respect for the young officers of the armed forces that twice tried to overthrow the government in 1992. As they put it, the officers had the "brios" (guts) to challenge a system in disarray where "the rich and the powerful are above the law."

<sup>6</sup> These conditions in the early part of the century differ sharply from the figures presented in the introduction for 1994.

<sup>7</sup> The Andean Region in Venezuelan is located in the southwestern part of the country and includes the states of Táchira, Mérida y Trujillo.

<sup>8</sup> For a comprehensive account see Levine, 1973.

<sup>9</sup> Rafael Caldera, a young law student at the time, was amongst the leaders of the movement which became known in Venezuelan history as the "Generation of '28."

<sup>10</sup> For a thorough discussion on the evolution and influence of AD on Venezuelan politics see Martz, 1965.

<sup>11</sup> For an account of the effect oil has had on the Venezuelan economy see Randall, 1987.

<sup>12</sup> Although some progress has been made (i. e. the direct election of governors in 1989 who were previously handpicked by the President), there still is an over-concentration of power at the center which has perpetuated institutional inertia. The growth of the public sector has been unprecedented. Corruption is rampant and electoral fraud was highly reported in the 1992 local and municipal elections and in the 1993 presidential elections. The politicization of the bureaucracy and of the justice system demonstrates the continued failure to institutionalize politics (called for in the Pact of Punto Fijo) witnessed since the 1960s; such institutionalization has been obstructed time after time in the last three decades.

<sup>13</sup> Anyone who has lived in Venezuela or has followed its contemporary history may not have been as surprised by these events as most of the world appears to have been, although the events took everyone by surprise because of their timing. See for example Silva Michelena, 1971; Gil Yepes, 1981; Naím, 1984; and FUNDAFUTURO, 1992. The events of 27 February 1989, a few days after Carlos Andrés Pérez had been inaugurated as President and adopted IMF austerity measures for the first time in the country's history are well documented in *Editora El Nacional*, 1989 and 1990. For an analysis of the first attempted coup on 4 February 1992 see Sonntag and Maingon, 1992. The leaders of both attempted coups, on 4 February and 27 November, accused Pérez of refusing to move against corruption and political cliques. It should be noted that the removal from office of Pérez in May of 1993 is a landmark in Venezuelan history. The Supreme Court ruled that grounds existed to prosecute the President on charges of embezzling and misappropriating government funds and the Senate, in a unanimous vote on 21 May, authorized the Court to try him on corruption charges. See *El Nacional*, *El Universal*, *El Diario de Caracas*, and *The Daily Journal* in Venezuela as well as the *New York Times*, 21 and 22 May, 1993. The outcome of the trial is still pending as of 25 February 1994.

<sup>14</sup> Hereafter simply Caracas. In 1936, most of what was known as Caracas was what is currently the municipality of Libertador. Today, the metropolitan area of Caracas officially constitutes the Federal District (municipalities of Libertador and Vargas) and the municipalities of Chacao and Sucre, both of Miranda **[end p. 10]** State. For my purposes, the metropolitan area of Caracas includes the Municipalities of Libertador (Federal District) and the municipalities of Chacao, Sucre, El Hatillo, and Baruta (Miranda State). It excludes the municipality of Vargas. Unfortunately, no maps exist that would allow one to identify the boundaries of these important metropolitan subdivisions. Nor are they available for neighborhoods.

<sup>15</sup> In Venezuela, the terms *barrio* and *urbanización*, both neighborhoods in principle, are used to represent two different communities divided along class lines; *barrio* connotes a neighborhood of low income or poor families while *urbanización* connotes a middle or upper middle class neighborhood. Many of the *barrios* that resulted from the in-migration of hundreds of thousands of rural families often lay outside the legal limits of the urban municipalities, or if within them in zones unoccupied by "normal" urban development. This meant that these unplanned and uncontrolled squatter zones (*ranchos*) often enjoyed few urban services such as clean water, sewage systems, street lighting, health centers and schools, and municipal officials and residents alike saw no reason to provide them with the same. The *barrio* organizations were thus new channels for obtaining urban services (see Ray 1969).

<sup>16</sup> This trend continued to the point that by the mid-1980s 94 percent of the country's revenues came from oil exports and almost 50 percent of the food consumed in the country was imported. This is discussed in detail in Rivero-Santos, 1989.

- <sup>17</sup> Between 1961 and 1971, the Federal District experienced a 48 percent population increase (OCEI 1992).
- <sup>18</sup> Interview with a founding member of the *Asociación de Residentes de la Urbanización La Floresta* (ARUFLO) and a leader of the neighbors' movement for over 32 years. Caracas, 10 November 1992. Many of the interviewees expressed interest in remaining anonymous. Therefore, all names are withheld.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Some of the ones which followed ARUFLO included: Aso-Marqués and Aso-Trinidad (1963), ASOPRAES (Prados del Este), APRACAF (EI Cafetal in 1969), AsoPaula, AsoLlanoVerde, AsoLomas del Mirador, AsoClara, AsoNaranjos, AproVerde, Los Pomelos, AsoSantaMarta, etc.
- <sup>21</sup> Although it was impossible to confirm this number, it was widely accepted as the approximate number by leaders of the neighbors' movement as of February, 1993. Number quoted here are from an interview with the President's Commissioner for Neighbors' Affairs. Caracas, Palacio de Miraflores, 11 November 1992.
- <sup>22</sup> Known by its acronym CESAP (Centro al Servicio de la Acción Popular). The largest NGO in Venezuela, CESAP has been a leader since 1965 in organizing sectores populares of lower income families both in rural and urban areas.
- <sup>23</sup> Such neighborhoods included La Vega, La Pastora, La Moran, Nuevo Horizonte, Caricuao, Petare, Propatria, Casalta, 23 de Enero, to name but a few.
- <sup>24</sup> Middle- and upper-middle class associations have been victims of such intervention as well. But as one leader noted " ... while *urbanizaciones* like Santa Mónica have been able to confront the governor's office regarding the uncontrolled proliferation of condominiums in their neighborhood, we have to depend on leaders of the local government, many of whom are our neighbors and members of political parties, to dispatch a truck with potable water up hill to the cerro ... it isn't a matter of dialogue but a matter of necessity ... and if that comes tied up with a vote for their party in the next election or for the member of the community they favor to win the elections in the neighborhood association, what can we do? ... they [political leaders] make us feel as if they are doing us a favor when in fact, isn't that our right?" Interview with a leader of a neighborhood association in "Cota 905," 12 November 1992. Also, see Grupo Praxis (1983); Hanes de Acevedo (1991); Santana (1992); Núñez (1992); and *El Universal* (1992)
- <sup>25</sup> See Santana (1983) and CONFEVECINOS (1989).
- <sup>26</sup> Ley Orgánica de Régimen Municipal (LORM), 1979.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup> Interview with the President's Commissioner for Neighbors' Affairs, leader of the neighbors' movement since 1961. Caracas, Palacio de Miraflores, 11 November 1992.
- <sup>29</sup> Interview, Caracas, 20 October 1992 and 13 January 1993. <sup>30</sup> See MIC 1982.
- <sup>31</sup> To that effect, there is a marked division in the neighbors' movement among those who believe that they

should remain outside of the political game of parties and elections and remain as a pressure group to the established institutions. Others believe that they have a responsibility to become active players in the political game through the creation of new and innovative forms of political organizations, able to compete with traditional parties in local elections. According to them, the only way to make any difference in such a politicized system is through such direct involvement. The first neighbors' organization to be elected to public office in 1992 was Decisión Ciudadana which won the mayoral race and the majority of seats in the municipality of Baruta (Miranda State) in metropolitan Caracas. At this point, it is too early to assess its performance.

<sup>32</sup> During the administration of Carlos Andrés Pérez, the following events stand out: implementation of IMF policies for the first time, which led to the social revolt of February 1989; two attempted coups in 1992; and the removal of the President from office in May 1993.

<sup>33</sup> Interview, Caracas, 13 January 1993.

<sup>34</sup> This article is part of the author's dissertation entitled "Grassroots and the State: Perspectives from the Neighbor's Movement in Caracas, Venezuela." (Syracuse University, 1995)

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## RESUMEN

La legitimidad del sistema democrático Venezolano se ha visto desafiado por diferentes sectores que han sido enajenados por las formas tradicionales de organización política que han dominado a la sociedad desde 1958. El nuevo gobierno, el cual tomó posesión el 2 de Febrero de 1994, encuentra a una sociedad civil en busca de métodos alternativos de representación y participación. Desde 1961, *Los Vecinos* de Venezuela se encuentran en esa búsqueda. Este artículo ilustra y evalúa sus experiencias. [end p. 12]