

# Venezuela after the *Caracazo*: Forms of Protest in a Deinstitutionalized context

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Protest has become in recent years one of the most visible features of everyday life in urban Venezuela. Since the middle eighties, but in particular after the *Caracazo* of 1989, the *Caraqueños* as well as residents of other cities of the country have had to adjust themselves to the hundreds of demonstrations that are held every year. In this article I shall present the most common forms of collective action over the last ten years, relating them to the process of deinstitutionalization that has developed during the decade. I shall discuss why extra-institutional forms of collective action of a confrontational and violent nature have spread from marginal actors to organizations that in the past had at their disposal alternative channels for presenting their complaints and demands.

Keywords: Forms of collective action, protest, social movements, deinstitutionalization, Venezuela, *Caracazo*

Unless we trace the forms of activity people use, how these reflect their demands, and their interaction with opponents and elites, we cannot understand either the magnitude or the dynamics of change in politics and society (Tarrow, 1989, pp. 7–8).

Protest has become in recent years one of the most visible features of everyday life in Caracas, the capital of Venezuela. Since the mid-1980s, but in particular after the *Sacudón* or *Caracazo* (civil disturbances in Caracas) of 1989, the *Caraqueños* (residents of Caracas) have had to adjust themselves to the hundreds of demonstrations that are held in the city every year. Many major and secondary cities throughout the country also witnessed the appearance of this phenomenon. But more remarkable than the protests themselves have been the changes in the forms and nature of collective action now being used. Venezuelans have been resorting more frequently than in the past to forms of protest of a confrontational or violent nature. Occurring with a frequency that might surprise scholars in other countries, the blocking of streets, avenues and even highways is something that has become common place. There has also been at certain times during the

past decade a high incidence of property violations, occupations of public buildings, and even what in Venezuelan colloquial Spanish are called 'disturbances', with tyre burning, barricades and window smashing. Until now scant insight has been provided into their causes and significance.

In an attempt to contribute to the understanding of such phenomena, in this article I discuss the most common forms of collective action over the last ten years, relating them to the process of 'de-institutionalisation' that has developed during the decade. The paper is organised in three sections and is supported by empirical data. First, I present some of the main socio-political features of the decade as well as quantitative data available on the protests. Secondly, I identify and describe the most visible forms of protest and compare their frequency prior to the *Caracazo* and after the occurrence of this popular revolt. Then I discuss why extra-institutional forms of collective action of a confrontational and violent nature have spread from marginal actors to organisations that in the past had at their disposal alternative channels for presenting their complaints and demands.

From a conceptual and methodological point of view, the approach which I adopt to the protests in Venezuela follows in many ways that of the historians of the British Marxist school who demonstrated the rational nature of these protests emphasising the perspective *from below* in the study and interpretation of historical processes (see Hobsbawm, 1959; Rudé, 1971 and 1995; Thompson, 1963, among others). Following these authors I consider the protests as events that have been organised or encouraged according to a certain rationality. To understand fully this rationality I use to sources that provide the perspective of the common people involved in these occurrences. I also acknowledge the influence of sociologists of the *contentious politics* approach such as Charles Tilly (1978) and Sidney Tarrow (1996) who have maintained the essentially political nature of these collective actions and have provided many conceptual and methodological tools for their analysis as political events. Here in particular I focus upon the concept of repertoire of contention, defined as a set of established forms of collective action characteristic of a society, that only change with deep or structural societal transformations (Tarrow, 1995: 89–115; Tilly, 1995: 15–42). I examine the forms of collective action of Venezuelan society in the 1990s, to establish the changes that have occurred. Through this analysis I seek to understand power-society relations during the decade, much in the way these authors have done with other societies.

The term protest will hereafter be understood as that disruptive action carried out by diverse social actors with the purpose of making public their disagreement with or dissension from rules, institutions, policies, powers, authorities and/or social and political conditions. By protest form I mean the diverse forms, which this disruptive action takes. The collection of protest forms that characterises a society at a specific time is known as its protest repertoire (Tilly, 1978, pp. 151 and *passim*).

The empirical background used to support this analysis comes from a computerised newspaper database called *El Bravo Pueblo* (hereinafter DBEP). This database at present contains the complete series of protest reports published

in *El Nacional* between 1983 and 1999. *El Nacional* is one of Venezuela's major newspapers based in Caracas, with a national circulation and an independent stance. This daily has been selected as the first to feed the database because it maintains a critical position towards the government, concerning itself with recording the different expressions of conflict in society. At the time of writing, reports from some earlier years have also been completed and these serve as comparative empirical data for the decade under study. It should be borne in mind that this analysis does have the limitations imposed by the use of just one newspaper.

## 1 An overall view of the 1990s protest

With the onset of the 1980s, the institutions of mediation and representation in Venezuela began to show signs of erosion. Questioning of the way political parties had related hitherto to society, corruption allegations against public servants and party members and a growing debate around the modernising role played by the state were distinctive features of the sociopolitical process during the years following 'Black Friday' of February 1983.<sup>1</sup> Increasing criticism brought about the creation in 1985 by President Lusinchi of the Comisión Presidencial de la Reforma del Estado (Copre), an institutional initiative taken by the state to reform itself (see Gómez Calcaño and López Maya, 1990: 39–55).

As 'Black Friday' led to inflation and economic recession, and the state started to make substantial cuts in various areas of expenditure, protest in the capital started to increase (Hillman, 1994: 95–114). Collective action was being conducted by many traditional social actors such as university student unions, who were being affected by the decreasing value of the educational budget, or the various *gremios* (guilds) of civil servants and professionals whose members' wages had been falling as a result of inflation. Nevertheless, some of these guilds demonstrated their independence from the parties that had controlled them in the past, and in some cases, – such as that of street-vendors demanding the right to work in the streets – new participants in collective action were making their appearance.

By the end of the decade, Venezuela had found itself in an even more severe economic and fiscal situation than in 1983. The Lusinchi administration (1984–1989) proved unable to overcome the economic difficulties it had inherited, and by the end of its term macroeconomic imbalances had become aggravated. Lusinchi also failed to deliver any of the state reforms he had promised. Days after the December 1988 general election campaign, in which government candidate Carlos Andrés Pérez triumphed, Lusinchi announced a moratorium on

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1 'Black Friday' February 1983 was the date when the Herrera Campíns administration was forced by debt and capital flight to devalue the bolivar and impose a controlled rate of exchange. On the decline of Venezuela's party system see, among others: Álvarez (1996), Gómez Calcaño and López Maya (1990) and Kornblith (1998).

the Venezuelan international debt, thus leaving the incoming president with the heavy burden of trying to overcome this extreme situation (Lander, 1997). In February 1989 Pérez took office.

After being sworn in on 4 February, Pérez announced on the 16th the signing of a macroeconomic adjustment programme with the International Monetary Fund as the way out of the economic and fiscal crisis. This meant a huge shift from his electoral promises not to side with neoliberalism. In an atmosphere full of tensions caused by the economic recession and scarcities of basic food products, first a massive popular revolt known as the *Caracazo* or *Sacudón* broke out, unleashing with it a wave of protests.

The *Caracazo* spread within hours from the capital to all the main and secondary cities of the country, which suffered barricades, road closures, burning of vehicles, stoning of shops, shooting and widespread looting. The cost in material and human losses was very high, and the deaths, which totalled almost four hundred, were largely of poor people resident in the capital.<sup>2</sup> The *Caracazo* was a turning point in Venezuela's political history, producing an irrevocable change in the relationship between state and society, above all in the way Venezuelans gave expression to their demands and feelings of malaise.

According to the Venezuelan non governmental organisation for human rights Provea (Programa Educación-Acción en Derechos Humanos), in the eleven years from October 1989 to September 2000, there were a total of 8,355 protests in the country, which represents an average of two protests daily including all weekends and holidays (see Table 1). Moreover, this high figure does not take into account the dozens of 'stoppages' or illegal strikes which were also taking place during these years and which contributed so significantly to the interruption of people's everyday routines. These collective actions have formed part of a scenario in which a hegemonic struggle is taking place and they have also contributed to the outcomes. Such protests, together with the failed coups of 1992, the impeachment of Pérez in 1993, the high number of abstentions at elections and the election victories of Rafael Caldera and Hugo Chávez Frías, are the most visible forms of the hegemonic process that has been at work throughout the decade.

Table 1 shows an increasing tendency towards protest activities, peaking in the years between 1991 and 1994 which correspond with the political crisis resulting in President Pérez's impeachment and his replacement by the emergency government of Ramón J. Velásquez. During these years we find a daily average of 2.75 protests. There is again a rise in 1999 and 2000, the first two years of the Chávez administration. Here the daily average reaches 2.83. Unfortunately Provea does not provide us with total numbers for the years of the previous decade which would enable us to give a more accurate comparative perspective. However, Hillman substantiates the increase of demonstrations throughout the 1980s (1994: 95–97).

As well as the strong visible presence of protest events throughout these years,

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2 For information and interpretation of the *Caracazo*, among others, see Coronil and Skurski (1991), Kornblith (1998) and López Maya (2000a).

**Table 1.** Total of protests according to Provea 1989–1999

Years	Total of protests
October 1989 to September 1990	675
October 1990 to September 1991	546
October 1991 to September 1992	873
October 1992 to September 1993	1047
October 1993 to September 1994	1096
October 1994 to September 1995	581
October 1995 to September 1996	534
October 1996 to September 1997	550
October 1997 to September 1998	385
October 1998 to September 1999	805
October 1999 to September 2000	1263
Total	8355

Source: Provea, *Situación de los derechos humanos. Informes anuales*.

the very nature of collective action seems also to have altered compared with its previous character. Protest can be classified according to the nature of the event as being conventional, confrontational or violent. In the first category I include those protest events well known to the general public which do not provoke fear or feelings of any sense of threat on the part of the authorities or the public (Lander, López Maya and Salamanca, 2000). Confrontational protests include new or illegal types of protest. They are not characterised by violence but use certain resources in order to provoke surprise, thus generating tensions or feelings of defiance among the authorities and the public. A protest in which participants are naked, for instance, could be considered a confrontational protest event, as could a road blockade (*ibid.*). Violent protest implies material or human damage. An examination of the reports of protest published in *El Nacional* in years prior to the *Caracazo* shows that protests of a conventional nature prevailed during the last years of the Lusinchi administration, whereas afterwards protests of a confrontational nature became the most common during the decade, and violent collective actions tended to increase (see Tables 2 and 3). Violent protests are the subject of one third of the total number of articles in these ten years, whereas they

**Table 2.** Nature of protest prior to the *Caracazo* (based on articles appearing in *El Nacional*) 1983–1988

Year	Conventional	Confrontational	Violent	Total
1983	147	8	7	162
1984	155	117	21	293
1985	206	41	15	262
1986	51	16	3	70
1987	36	15	32	83
1988	70	17	16	103
Total	665	214	94	973

Source: Base de Datos *El Bravo Pueblo*, 2001.

**Table 3.** Nature of protest after the *Caracazo* (based on articles appearing in *El Nacional*) 1989–1999

Year	Conventional	Confrontational	Violent	Total
1989	75	85	53	213
1990	39	54	30	123
1991	8	36	31	75
1992	13	56	64	133
1993	52	64	58	174
1994	49	65	73	187
1995	64	62	63	189
1996	53	122	98	273
1997	81	44	50	175
1998	77	67	22	166
1999	43	239	72	354
<b>TOTAL</b>	554	894	614	2,062

Source: Base de Datos *El Bravo Pueblo*, 2001.

amounted to only about one tenth of the total between 1983 and 1988.

A closer look at protest in the 1990s also reveals a variation in the frequency of different forms of the Venezuelan repertoire in relation to previous years. In the following section, I identify, define and estimate the significance of the most visible forms of collective action in the overall picture of the decade comparing them with the previous six years.

## 2 Changes in the frequency of protest forms

The data provided by the newspaper *El Nacional* in the 1990s shows the increased presence of certain forms of collective action, less visible in previous years (see Tables 4 and 5). The stoppages and marches, which are familiar and permanent forms of protest, had been the predominant forms of contention during the Lusinchi administration (see Table 4). However, after 1989 although stoppages persist as the most reported form of the Venezuelan repertoire, marches are substituted by disturbances as the second most reported form of protest, and street blockades move to fourth place after being in sixth position prior to the *Caracazo*. Blockades seem to be in the process of becoming a permanent form of collective action for they are persistent and numerous in the last five years. Forms of a violent nature – disturbances, looting and burning – show an irregular pattern, though the tendency for them is to decrease towards the end of the decade (see Table 5).

In this section I describe with some detail these forms of action and relate them to their previous history in Venezuelan society in order to understand the quality of the changes taking place in the repertoire of contention.

**Table 4.** Protest forms in Venezuela prior to the *Caracazo* (based on reports appearing in *El Nacional*) 1983–1988

Year	Stoppages	Marches	Disturbances	Occupations	Burnings	Blockages	Lootings
1983	109	9	7	11	0	1	0
1984	101	14	12	14	6	4	2
1985	141	12	6	16	3	1	0
1986	73	10	4	8	1	2	0
1987	68	21	27	2	16	3	6
1988	79	13	16	6	4	5	3
Total	571	79	72	57	30	15	11

Source: Base de Datos *El Bravo Pueblo*, 2001.**Table 5.** Protest forms in Venezuela after the *Caracazo* (based on reports appearing in *El Nacional*) 1989–1999

Year	Stoppages	Marches	Disturbances	Occupations	Burnings	Blockages	Lootings
1989	132	39	24	13	11	18	26
1990	96	29	22	4	7	4	7
1991	66	29	11	3	16	3	4
1992	75	44	10	12	18	10	10
1993	88	50	21	13	26	10	16
1994	89	61	25	30	29	21	13
1995	93	42	27	15	18	14	9
1996	96	69	28	29	25	17	16
1997	97	21	21	18	12	7	1
1998	104	18	23	20	0	1	0
1999	155	49	38	56	8	26	5
Total	1091	451	250	213	170	131	107

Source: Base de Datos *El Bravo Pueblo*, 2001.

### *Stoppages*

Table 5 shows how Venezuelans have made abundant use during these years of the protest known as the ‘stoppage’ or strike: in Venezuelan colloquial Spanish, the *paro*. The exact nature and number of these ‘stoppages’, however, is difficult to establish because the official figures of legal and illegal strikes have for many years been handled inefficiently, and indeed manipulated, to present an unreal picture of labour peace and harmony (Arrieta, interview, 1999; Cáribas, interview, 1999). Nor is newspaper information particularly useful because journalists rarely distinguish between legal and illegal strikes in their reports: both are indiscriminately called *huelgas* or *paros* (legal or illegal strikes).

In spite of these difficulties, it is safe to assert that legal strikes have been a rare form of protest during the past decade. Until 1999 they could only develop in the private sector of the economy but because of economic recession and the growing numbers of workers being dismissed from their jobs, strikes became too risky for workers. During the years of the Pérez administration (1989–1993), the official figures provided by the Ministry of Labour show a total of twenty legal strikes in five years, many of which took place in companies owned by the state though subject to company law (Ministerio del Trabajo, 1989–1994). Civil servants’ right to strike was clearly only established in 1990 through the new Labour Law. Before this it was a constitutional right, but other legal provisions confused the issue leading to the widespread conception that public employees could not exercise this right (Cáribas, interview, 1999). Moreover, it was only with the labour regulations of 1999 that the procedures for calling a strike in the public sector were clearly spelt out (*ibid.*). This means that legal strikes by public workers are an extremely rare and predominantly recent development and it explains why workers of the public sector of the economy mobilised mainly through illegal ‘stoppages’ during the whole democratic period. These stoppages have been extremely frequent throughout the last decade so that Venezuelans have come to regard them as the normal way of protesting not only on the part of public employees, such as those in the judiciary, teachers, surgeons, nurses and engineers, but also truck or public transport drivers who do not hesitate to walk out whenever they have a complaint over public fare regulations or safety risks while performing their jobs. To judge from the number of articles appearing in *El Nacional*, stoppages by public servants constituted the major form of protest. They represented 45.21 per cent of the total reported during the decade.

### *Disturbances*

The second most reported form of protest during the decade is what I call the ‘disturbance’, to use the media’s term. The disturbance is a traditional form of protest in Venezuela. Associated with the student movement at certain political junctures during the twentieth century it acquired significant visi-



bility.<sup>3</sup> Disturbances have been on the increase since the popular revolt which occurred in the Andean city of Mérida in 1987, provoked by the murder of student Luis Carballo at the hands of a prominent lawyer in the city.<sup>4</sup> During 1986, prior to the Merida revolt, DBEBP registers only five reports as disturbances. However, after the revolt, between March and December, 27 reports appeared of disturbances in other cities in the country, and they have continued to appear subsequently. A number of disturbances preceded the Caracazo in 1989, increasing in number after it. After the failed *coup* of 4 February 1992, and throughout 1993, both before and after President Pérez's impeachment, disturbances spread across the country. DBEBP collected 451 disturbance reports during these years: 55.87 per cent of which happened between 1989–1994 and the remaining 44.13 per cent during the Caldera and Chávez administrations (see Table 5).

A disturbance in Venezuela can be defined as a form of collective action that is violent and apparently anarchic in nature. Disturbances, although associated with student protests, have been an expedient to which some social actors outside the formal economy and/or at the margins of society also tend to resort. Additionally, disturbances arise when social groups, perceiving a particularly unjust situation, react to it with bitter indignation. Such is the case with those which break out as a result of the assassination of a student or a worker by the police or military, or those provoked by fraud or unjust sentences imposed by the Judicial Court.

Most disturbances during the decade show a surprisingly uniform pattern. They usually began in the context of a student protest taking place either in the surroundings of educational buildings or at the end of a march in the city centre. Most disturbances were started by students fighting the police, or vice-versa. While many marches did not turn into disturbances, the ones that always did were those which featured the presence of *encapuchados*, young people who covered their faces in order to protect themselves from reprisals by remaining anonymous, and thereby better able to defy the police directly and violently. The *encapuchados* had started appearing in the early 1980s, but over the course of the decade, particularly during the Pérez administration, they became predominant protagonists in street politics.<sup>5</sup>

The disturbance is a complex protest which also incorporates other forms. A distinctive feature is the fighting which occurs between the police and the students/*encapuchados*. Either side could provoke the action. During the decade the police used shooting, tear gas, beatings and anti-riot vehicles against the students, being later equipped with the so-called 'whale-tanks' (water cannon) that drenched the protesters with water. *Encapuchados* and students would

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3 For instance, 1935–1936; 1958–1959, 1969 (see López Maya, 2000b). See also DBEBP, descriptor 'DISTURBANCE'.

4 A reconstruction of how the murder occurred as well as the protest wave that it unchained in López Maya (1999).

5 See DBEBP, descriptor 'ENCAPUCHADO'.

resort to slings, mortars, rockets, stones, bottles and petrol bombs, with the use of firearms being reported occasionally. These fights would result not only in arrest and injuries but also, on occasion, fatalities.

As well as the actual fighting, the disturbance could give rise to other activities which produced more violence. For example, it was usual at that time for the actors to close the streets to traffic by means of barricades. Rubbish would be scattered across the street or vehicles seized to block the road. Tyres were also thrown down and burned. The most aggressive disturbances involved the seizure of vehicles and their subsequent burning. Since public-transport drivers would customarily come into confrontation with students, it was their vehicles which were the favourites for burning, though the vehicles of any company, lorries or even private cars were liable to be seized. During the Pérez administration *encapuchados* seized food lorries, looted them and distributed the goods among the people; once empty, the trucks were burned. On 4 April 1989, for instance, *El Nacional's* second report following the *Caracazo* deals with the seizure and burning, in a street near the Central University, of a lorry loaded with mattresses, another belonging to a fabrics store, another carrying toilet paper and also a van belonging to the telephone company (*El Nacional*, 14 April 1989, p. D-last). Disturbances could break out in areas close to public high schools and universities, or take place at the end of a march with the stoning of shop windows and vehicles. They could also last for days and extend to several cities simultaneously. Disturbances with looting were common during 1989, 1992 and 1993 but have diminished notably since then. During that period, ordinary people joined the *encapuchados* and students in stoning stores and looting.

After the failed *coup* of 4 February 1992, and in spite of the restrictions on constitutional rights, disturbances intensified and the country became a powder keg. Later that year, violent disturbances with burning and looting erupted as a result of the local and regional elections in Barinas, Lara and Sucre states, where people strongly believed a fraud had been committed by Acción Democrática (AD), the government party. In August 1992, the centre of Caracas had to be militarised to prevent disturbances on the day the President went to the Congress to deliver his annual statement (*El Nacional*, 8 March 1993). Following this statement, riots occurred in Maracaibo, Los Teques, Cumaná, Barquisimeto, San Cristóbal, Rubio, Palmira, Maturín, La Pica, Maracay, Cagua, La Victoria and Barinas. Before Pérez's impeachment on 20 May, three other reports of disturbances appear. Since then protest disturbances have continued, albeit of lower intensity and scope. However, in 1999, the first year of the Chávez administration, disturbances, according to the reports in *El Nacional*, seem to have made a come-back (BDEBP).

### *Marches*

The march, the third most reported form of collective action in Venezuela during the 1990s, is characterised as being peaceful and involves moving from one point to another in the city in accordance with a plan previously agreed by the

organisers. When the march has met the necessary requirements for it to take place, involving notifying the relevant authorities about its date and route, it is an authorised march.<sup>6</sup> Such marches have been staged by political parties and unions since 1958 usually without provoking feelings of fear in authorities or the general public. However, depending on the actors who use this form of protest, the circumstances under which they develop, and the behaviour of the authorities and police forces, marches can turn into protests of a confrontational or violent nature. During the decade this was frequently the case, the violence usually breaking out when police and participants confronted each other. Here is one typical example of violence breaking out during a student march in 1991:

Nearly ten thousand people gathered yesterday to demonstrate against the suspension of the final year classes of elementary, middle and upper secondary education on the order of the Minister of Education. The march proceeded from the Casa Sindical in El Paraíso up to Caracas Square. The participants demanded that school activities be resumed, and an end to repression; the economic package was criticised, being labelled as a creator of poverty. The merciless assassination of students was also condemned. Three UCV buses full of students joined them and as the march ended, violence broke out. A group of about 40 people disobeyed the order to stay away from the National Congress, giving rise to general confusion, with shooting, tear gas and stoning that broke the windows of the Metropolitan and Venezuela Banks, Miranda Savings and Loan Bank as well as El Chicote restaurant; looting attempts occurred at a record shop near the Teatro Municipal, but the owner, armed with a spade fended off the looters. There were no arrests or injuries (*El Nacional*, 5 December 1991, p. C-1).

A frequent characteristic of marches in Venezuela is the originality shown by the groups who organise them to attract the attention of authorities and public. Disguises, mini-theatre plays, slogans, leaflets, banners, flags and chants are some of the complementary activities that contribute to making it one of the most impressive and efficient forms of protest. Also, organisers may come up with confrontational ideas, such was the case with a student nude march in 1998, or a march featuring a fake but impressive crucifixion carried out by retired workers in 1997. Such protests catch the front page of the newspapers and usually their protagonists have a good chance of obtaining their demands. It is noteworthy, however, how frequently marches in this decade took on a violent nature. The database *El Bravo Pueblo* registers a total of 250 reports on marches between 1989 and 1999, of which more than a third record violent situations.<sup>7</sup>

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6 March organisers must inform regional authorities, in advance, of the route and timing of the protest event.

7 See DBEBP descriptor 'MARCH' and 'VIOLENT'.

## Blockades

Road and street blockades have become another common form of protest in Venezuela. According to the figures provided in the reports of *El Nacional*, they were the fourth most visible form of collective action during the decade (see Table 5). Provea's statistics, however, present the blockade as the most common form of protest during the Pérez administration (see Provea, 1989–1994).<sup>8</sup> The obstruction of streets, roads or even motorways in order to attract the attention of the authorities has always been a traditional form of urban protest in the country. Nevertheless, parties and unions from 1958 onwards did not make use of it, because it was considered an illicit form of collective action, there being no proper procedures for obtaining permission to use public roads to carry out such action. Before the Pérez administration, it was considered a violent protest and as such, it was completely repressed (Cubas, interview, 1997). However, some exceptions have always been made, and I shall come back to these further on.

The few blockades before 1989 recorded in *El Bravo Pueblo* bear some interesting characteristics that help explain their abundance after 1989. During 1961, for instance, the four street and road blockades reported by *El Nacional* had unemployed people, housewives and local residents as their organisers, all social sectors not then linked to the political parties.<sup>9</sup> In subsequent years, road blockades, when carried out, were organised by political organisations and unions which had either weak ties with the parties and unions of the establishment (the student unions are an outstanding example) or had no other public space to turn to when regular conciliation procedures failed. This is the case with the various associations of public transport and lorry drivers which sometimes used this form of protest during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Likewise, there was some use of road blockades by peasants and agricultural producers. In this case, the roads closed were not the city streets but the roads into towns and cities. In addition, both high-school and university students have used the street blockade as a form of protest but, as we have seen already, in the last ten years it has evolved into a more complex and violent protest form, the disturbance. Another sector which has used street blockades throughout the democratic period are the local resident organisations, both those of the popular '*barrios*' as well as those of the middle and upper class districts.

Prior warning is not usually given of street or road blockades by their organisers since one of the purposes is to take the authorities and the public by surprise. Although the government usually suppresses the blockades once aware they are being carried out, by then they have already achieved their objective: that of drawing the authorities' attention to certain problems. It is worth noting that, depending on the circumstances, the forms of suppression vary: middle and upper

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8 Provea's statistics do not include stoppages nor disturbances. But it is interesting that they are placed as the most frequent form of protest – ahead of marches – because their database is fed not only by *El Nacional* but also includes other national and local newspapers as well as radio information (Cubas, interview, 1997).

9 See DBEBP, year 1961, descriptor: 'ROAD BLOCKADE'.

class housewives are not cleared from the streets by beating, shooting and tear gas, which is the case with those organised by community associations from the popular sectors, street vendors and, until recently, the pensioners.<sup>10</sup> When this form of protest is used by the middle and upper classes, officials of the regional or municipal governments usually come to talk to the participants and promise to solve the problems at issue (see *El Nacional*, 23 June 1989, p. A-1). Ironically, it was Caracas Metropolitan Police, the body which is supposed to suppress illicit protests, who used the street blockade to protest about an official entry and search of their headquarters ordered by the regional government in 1989 (*El Nacional*, 13 June 1989, p. D-last).

The total number of protests of this type reflect its probable social acceptance, albeit one difficult to establish for certain, perhaps because it was considered appropriate in view of the inefficiency of more institutional or licit mediation channels. In many of the 213 press reports in DBEBP, the journalists repeatedly highlight the protesters' argument that they were using this means as a last resort, having exhausted all other channels in seeking a solution to their demands.

### *Occupations*

Various actors in this period have also used the occupation of buildings and land as a form of protest action. The DBEBP recorded 131 reports of such a tactic (see Table 5); Provea's database recorded 564 occupation events during the five years of the Pérez and Velásquez administrations, a very significant number indeed (Provea, 1989–1994). As with street blockades, this is an illicit form of protest highly confrontational in nature. However, it has been tolerated by the authorities in the past in relation to certain actors and problems, and has even been used by organisations associated with the parties and unions of the establishment. This is the case with land invasions linked early in the democratic period with organised agricultural sectors allied to AD. Nevertheless, whenever left-wing parties or social associations carried out land occupations in rural areas they were rigorously suppressed.

In addition to various rural sectors and left-wing political alliances, high school and university students have in the past used the occupation of public educational buildings as a mean of calling attention to their grievances. Particularly attractive have been the rector's' and faculty deans' offices, the University Council offices, and school principals' offices. This form of collective action has proved successful in achieving its objectives with regard to demands and problems that have motivated it, as some of the database reports demonstrate. Occupations are preferably carried out in buildings the importance of which creates cause for alarm or which have a symbolic significance for the occupiers. Among the favourite non-educational buildings are embassies or consulates, government offices or city halls. One of the most famous occupations of the recent past was that of Caracas Cathedral carried out by a group of textile

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10 See the case of the La Florida housewives in *El Nacional*, 23 June 1989: p. C-2.

workers dismissed by their factories in 1980 (Arconada, 1995; *El Nacional*, 17 January 1980, p. D-last).

Occupations are subject to different degrees of suppression depending on who the organisers are and against whom they are directed. During the 1960s, when a struggle for power took place between government and guerrillas, building or office occupations by left wing organisations were severely suppressed since they could be confused with guerrilla attacks, a frequent form of conflict at the time. In the decade under examination I have been able to observe varying degrees of tolerance by the authorities. For instance, *El Nacional* contained reports on some occupations defined as ‘peaceful’ or ‘symbolic’, which had a fixed term of occupation and, as a result, their challenge to the public order was considered to be minor. These kinds of occupations were only lightly suppressed. Others organised by municipal authorities not only were tolerated, but even wore a certain aura of legitimacy. Furthermore they accomplished their goals, as in the case of the one organised by the Sucre District Mayor in 1992 (*El Nacional*, 10 June 1992, p. C-1). However, most of those occupations, carried out by actors or authorities with less influence over their adversaries, were resisted or suppressed.

Moving on to a different form of occupation I find the land invasions used by peasant sectors, which were part of the rural repertoire of the past, to be rarely observed during this decade, since rural protests represent scarcely two per cent of those reported by *El Nacional*. However, land invasions became surprisingly prominent during 1999 when President Chávez took office (López Maya, Smilde and Stephany, 2001; Muñoz in *El Nacional*, 16 April 2001). Instigated by opposition peasant unions but caused by real and deep-rooted rural problems, land invasions became one of the first and most difficult political issues for the new administration. The government reacted in a shrewd and sensible way: it sent out clear signals that violence would not be used against the invaders, recognising that the protest had a genuine motive, and lost no time in promising a planned solution by consultation to the demands which had triggered the invasions. By doing so, it was able to control the situation without it spilling over into some kind of rural revolt with unpredictable consequences. Most of the invaders retreated and still await the solution of their problems (López Maya, Smilde and Stephany, 2001).

In contrast, occupations of houses or apartment buildings by poor or middle class sectors are common and well documented during the 1990s. They occur especially in cities in the states of Aragua, Trujillo and Portuguesa. The newspapers repeatedly report that the invasions occurred after months of struggle and unfulfilled promises and that they were organised by community associations, sometimes with the participation of municipal officials and even of mayors (*El Nacional*, 15 February 1989, p. D-19; 18 March 1992, p. D-19; 29 January 1993, p. D-20). As with other illicit but relatively accepted forms of protest that I have been analysing, the authorities’ reaction depends on who the actors are.

A striking example of the toleration shown towards this form of protest appears in the statement made by the Mayor of the municipality of Caroní,

Clemente Scotto (1990–1996), with regard to occupations promoted by local leaders of AD seeking to destabilise the alternative local government represented by Scotto. The Mayor belonged to an emerging political party of the time, La Causa R, which had defeated AD to win the strategic local government district. Mayor Scotto assumed a tolerant attitude towards this form of protest asserting that although it clearly involved political party interests, nevertheless the problems of lack of land and housing did exist and had to be solved (Harnecker, 1993).

### **3 Protest and de-institutionalisation**

Just as the changes in social and political attitudes and in electoral behaviour demonstrate the decay of party institutions in Venezuela, so do the changes in frequency and manner in which Venezuelans take to the streets to protest about their hardships. Although street politics has always been, in Latin America, the means by which more vulnerable social groups can get their voices heard by those in power, given that formal channels have never been that influential or efficient (Eckstein, 1989: 20), the alterations in the relative importance of different forms of protest in the total picture in Venezuela in the past ten to fifteen years is an indicator of the extent to which unions and parties, which had fulfilled the role of popular representation and mediation in the past, have ceased to fulfill these functions.

We have seen how blockades and occupations have assumed an increased and accepted presence during the decade. Their previous status was that of illicit forms of collective action used predominantly by social or political actors who were ‘outside’ the institutional system, i.e. the unemployed, left-wing student unions and the like. Workers belonging to unions linked to traditional parties would not use such procedures. It is true, however, that public transport or lorry drivers with traditional union affiliations would on occasions resort to a road or street blockade, the street being their institutional place of work. In the 1990s, the range of groups which use this form of protest has broadened. As the DBEBP shows, besides the unemployed, local residents, students and lorry and public transport drivers, these tactics are also now used by indigenous communities, street-vendors, retired workmen and other groups. Moreover, other actors from the walks of life that in the past would have not thought of resorting to it are also using this illicit form of collective action: oilworkers, policemen, doctors and nurses, teachers in state schools, and unions in the public health sector. Of particular note are mayors and town councillors who have assisted residents from their municipality in the blockades, or even organised them themselves, to protest against some national agency or service company. The increasing number of people using these methods indicates the extent to which the level of conflict has increased in society with the result that it can no longer be contained by the means used in the past for resolving institutional problems. It also shows that this form of protest has in recent years acquired a deeper modular character and

certain actors, who in the past had institutional links to parties and would not approve of its use, are now acting independently.

Occupations were used in the past mainly by students. However, on occasions the database shows that local residents and the unemployed might resort to the occupation of some public building in order to draw the attention of the authorities. In addition to these two groups, two others appear in specific contexts prior to the 1990s: the guerrillas in the 1960s, and certain public unions – primarily from the public health sector – during a period when the AD party was in opposition to the government (1979–1984). As an illicit form of collective action, occupations were never of a conventional nature but led to confrontation and frequently violence. As for land occupations, they were almost exclusively the form of protest used by peasants and they were supported by peasant unions with party connections. After the 1960s, land occupations were extremely scarce. Lately, however, land invasions have reappeared indicating that the problems confronting the rural sector can no longer be contained by the old forms of mediation and representation. In addition, the occupation of urban apartment buildings or houses has become a new manifestation of the occupation as a form of protest. These various kinds of occupation are being used by most of the actors who also resort to blockades, from street vendors to civil servants from several branches of government and the public health and education services, as well as employees of the judiciary. It is, though, a less frequent form of collective action than the blockades or the disturbances.

We have seen how disturbances have escalated dramatically in certain years and grown in number over the decade as a whole. The protagonists have been both high school and university student organisations, and the so-called *encapuchados*. As far as the student movement is concerned, this form of collective action is a traditional part of its repertoire that during the 1990s has become particularly frequent, with a capacity to extend simultaneously to many cities in the country. In addition, during this decade, especially between 1989 and 1994, disturbances have included the looting of lorries carrying foodstuffs and other goods. Additionally, on occasions local residents have accompanied the students and joined in the fighting and the looting with them.

The visibility of this form of collective action demonstrates the high profile of the student movement, not dissimilar to that which it attained at other critical political junctures in twentieth-century Venezuelan history. As in 1935–1936, 1958 and the early sixties, the student movement comes to the centre of the political stage and takes the lead in expressing the irritation of large segments of society. Also as then, the institutions of representation and mediation have become weak or are simply absent. However, this juncture seems different from the previous periods of widespread protests in that alternative organisations are also few and weak. This could explain why many of the protests, though highly confrontational and violent, do not reveal a clear political target. In contrast, in the protests of the previous periods, democracy or revolution were the political object behind the struggle. The presence of such high levels of violence may be related to the strategies that high school and university student organisations



developed by that time. Such a hypothesis might justify further study. In any case, violence is the product of a complex convergence of processes in which the weakness of institutions that regulate everyday life, such as the police force or the judiciary, also play a central role. Such institutions had been decaying since the 1980s in Venezuela.

The 'stoppages' suggest even more interesting lines of thought. It cannot escape notice that it was not until 1990 that a new Labour Law was enacted, the previous one having been drafted in 1936. The law regulating labour in Venezuela up to 1990 was drafted at a time when the process of profound modernisation and democratisation of Venezuelan society was only just beginning. In spite of various reforms to update this law during the democratic regime, no effort was ever made to clarify legally the conditions under which public employees, a significant proportion of the Venezuelan labour force, had the right to strike. This legal vacuum left the possibility of improving wages and standards of living largely at the mercy of the good will of the employer, the Venezuelan state. This suited the nature of the links established between civil service unions and political parties, providing the necessary scope for clientelism, patronage and other forms of personalistic influence.

While government and unions had leaders belonging to the same political party, or to parties that could easily reach agreements, and while fiscal resources were not in short supply, relations proceeded smoothly and lent legitimacy to party leaders in control of the strings of power and union representation. 'Stoppages' could be used when needed to serve political strategies. None of these actors seemed to care about legalising the procedures for exercising the constitutional right to strike. The problems arose once the budget went into deficit because in such a situation the demands of constituencies could not be met and conflict tended to no longer be contained by the personalistic and corporatist methods of resolution. The bonds between party and union leaders and between them and their constituencies, could then not avoid erosion. As these bonds broke down, civil service unions in the different branches of government, and from diverse social groups, started to act autonomously. In the process stoppages increased dramatically because this was the only means provided for within the institutional framework.

## Conclusions

Roberts (2001: 183–200) has recently argued that social and economic change brought about by the market orientated economy has been all the more disruptive in societies which, like Venezuela, during the import substitution industrialisation model built strong labour-mobilising parties. Venezuela has in the course of a decade seen the stable bipolar party system collapse to be replaced by an unstable multi-polar one (Molina, 2000). One of the major consequences of such a process has been to reveal and further enfeeble the weak institutional channels of communication between society and power that the democratic regime had

established. We have found through the identification and analysis of the most frequent forms of protest of the 1990s, that this process has brought the emergence of forms of protest that are predominantly illicit and of a confrontational and violent nature.

However, this change in the repertoire of Venezuelan society is less a change of forms than a change in the frequency in which these forms are used. The analysis has revealed that most forms practiced in the 1990s have been forms of protest that during the democratic period were exerted by actors on the margins of, or in opposition to, the sociopolitical order. Traditional parties and unions channeled protest through less disruptive forms of mobilisation, such as marches, legal strikes and the like. The decline of these political institutions has impelled a wider scope of actors to reach out to these illicit forms of action, confrontational and violent in nature. Nevertheless, these forms do not mean a deep or structural transformation is taking place in society, as a change in repertoire would suggest. They are not new forms but rather the more confrontational and violent part of the usual Venezuelan repertoire that has been revitalised and appropriated by other non-marginal social and political actors through the erosion of the party and union relations, that until economic recession and adjustment policies, had functioned efficiently, permitting peaceful relations between the different social groups.

The analysis of Venezuela's repertoire of contention unveils the low level of institutionalisation that characterised relations between power and popular sectors throughout the democratic period. It also demonstrates that the decline of the political system in the 1990s has weakened further the channels of communication between both, influencing the working class sectors to choose forms of action of a more confrontational and violent nature. The rationale behind this choice becomes also very clear: through blockades, occupations and the like, weakened social actors gain the capacity to attract the attention of those in power at low cost in terms of organisation and mobilising resources. The study of Venezuela's repertoire of the 1990s, following the example of the British Marxist bottom-up approach, demonstrates the way in which social actors work to overcome the process of deinstitutionalisation of their representative institutions.

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## Interviews

Arrieta, Javier Ignacio, S.J.: Labour lawyer, member of the Gumilla Centre, an adviser to diverse unions and professor in labour subjects at the Universidad Católica Andrés

*Margarita López-Maya*

Bello and the Central University of Venezuela. Informal interview given in his offices in the University Parish, Caracas, 1999.

Cáribas, Alejandro: Labour lawyer and legal adviser to the Asociación de Profesores de la Universidad Central de Venezuela (APUCV). At present he is the Superintendent of Banks of Venezuela. Interview given in his APUCV office, Caracas, 1999.

Cubas, Raúl: Member of Provea and specialist in human rights. Informal interview given in his Provea office, Caracas, 21 July 1997.