

Popular Protest in Venezuela

Novelties and Continuities

by

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Since the mid-1980s, Venezuela has been perceived both at home and abroad as a society in constant mobilization. Following the Amparo massacre in 1988 and the so-called Caracazo in 1989, the number of protests registered has generally been high, although naturally some years have been more turbulent than others. By way of contrast, in the early 1980s Venezuela was generally considered one of the countries in Latin America least prone to popular mobilizations. It was argued that its firm democratic institutions and substantial oil revenue had facilitated the consolidation of efficient mechanisms for mediation and representation, thus avoiding internecine social conflict. The Venezuelans were “different” from the rest of Latin America precisely because they had apparently succeeded in overcoming the socio-political turbulence endemic to the region. In academic circles this attitude was reflected in the literature that postulated the “exceptionalism” of Venezuela within the Latin American context. The sharp contrast between these two perceptions obliges us to reexamine the question of “street politics” in Venezuela since 1958.

This article analyzes popular protest before and after the 1980s to demonstrate that, despite changes, the protests of the past were not substantially different from the more recent ones either in their frequency or in their motives and other aspects. Using the empirical information available in the Base de Datos El Bravo Pueblo (BDEBP) and in the annual reports of the Programa Venezolano de Educación y Acción en Derechos Humanos (Venezuelan Program for Education and Action on Human Rights—Provea), we conclude that the characteristics of popular protest in recent decades are less of a

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novelty than has been assumed, while the peace and harmony associated with the 1970s are more an illusion than a reality. In this earlier period there were also moments of acute social tension and important street mobilizations; the difference is that they did not seriously undermine the legitimacy of the political system, its principal actors, or the state structure whose foundations had been established in 1958.

RECENT PROTESTS: VISIBILITY AND CHARACTERISTICS

In response to the macroeconomic adjustment program announced by Carlos Andrés Pérez's recently installed government (1989–1993), a massive social uprising shook Caracas and the other principal Venezuelan cities between February 27 and March 3, 1989. The Caracazo, as it came to be known, was a popular protest that stands out in recent Venezuelan history for its duration, geographical scope, intensity, and violence.¹ The disturbances revealed the extent to which the legitimacy of the political system had been undermined. Indeed, they contributed to a political crisis soon to be reflected in the frustrated military coups of 1992 and the removal of President Pérez in 1993. This uprising had been preceded in October 1988 by another violent incident (less well-known outside Venezuela) that also contributed to a questioning of the legitimacy of the Venezuelan state: the Amparo massacre. Venezuelan police and military forces had assassinated a group of villagers on a fishing trip near the Colombian border and presented the incident as an encounter with a Colombian guerrilla group. The unanticipated survival of two of the villagers and the subsequent mobilization of the local community brought the truth to light and provoked widespread indignation. These two episodes represented a turning point for popular protest in Venezuela and oblige us to examine a phenomenon that has always existed but previously received little attention: "street politics." By this we mean interaction in a public space between social and political actors (including the multitude) and various representatives of the state. Those who opt for street politics are, above all, the social sectors most distant from the centers of power (Eckstein, 1989: 28).

As a result of the Caracazo, Provea (a nongovernment organization for the defense of human rights) was founded and began to publish annual reports on the human rights situation in the country, including detailed monitoring of the right to demonstrate peacefully in the streets. Thanks to this initiative, we now have a reasonably reliable source of information on popular demonstra-

tions during the past decade and a half: how many there were, the actors involved, their motives, and the response of the authorities.

More recently, additional information has been made available as the result of an independent academic initiative of the Central University of Venezuela: the creation of a database on popular demonstrations, the BDEBP, that is designed eventually to cover the entire twentieth century. While Provea draws on a variety of national and regional newspapers to feed its database, the BDEBP's coverage is more restricted: it registers the information available in just one of the national dailies (*El Nacional*) since its founding in 1944 and that available in other dailies for earlier years. Nevertheless, the information registered in the BDEBP is more detailed than that of Provea and, as noted, covers a far longer period. We have sufficient information from these two sources to examine the demonstrations in recent years and compare them with those that took place before the Caracazo.

Despite their well-known limitations, newspaper sources have been increasingly accepted as a useful contribution to research on social conflict (Tarrow, 1989: 357–365; Franzosi, 1996: 377). However, we need to bear in mind the characteristics of this kind of source, together with the differences between the two databases we are using. As already mentioned, both databases rely on information offered by the newspapers and therefore to some extent reflect their limitations as a source. The daily press tends to register what is considered “newsworthy” and will therefore give preference to conflictive or violent events rather than to those with more routine characteristics. Editorial policy also affects coverage and may change over time, modifying the frequency and the way in which protests are reported. At the same time, our two databases are designed differently. Provea registers protest incidents, while in the BDEBP the reference is to the news items that appeared in *El Nacional*. Furthermore, Provea's annual reports cover from October to September of the following year. As a result, the numbers offered by the two sources are not strictly comparable. Nevertheless, since we are not aiming at precise quantification, the information available is sufficient to give us a reliable general picture of the characteristics of popular protest in Venezuela before and after the Caracazo.

According to Provea, during the 14 years from October 1989 to September 2003 there were 12,889 protests in the country, an average of 2.52 per day, including weekends and holidays (see Table 1). (Except for 2001–2003, the totals do not include strikes and work stoppages.) During these years, there are two periods of particularly intense activity: between 1991 and 1994 and between 1999 and 2003. During the first of these periods, there was an acute political crisis reflected most dramatically in the abortive military

TABLE 1
Protests and Protest News Items, 1983–2002

<i>Year</i>	<i>Protests</i>	<i>News Items</i>
Oct. 1983 to Sept. 1984	—	283
Oct. 1984 to Sept. 1985	—	157
Oct. 1985 to Sept. 1986	—	191
Oct. 1986 to Sept. 1987	—	124
Oct. 1987 to Sept. 1988	—	121
Oct. 1988 to Sept. 1989	—	225
Oct. 1989 to Sept. 1990	675	156
Oct. 1990 to Sept. 1991	546	220
Oct. 1991 to Sept. 1992	873	159
Oct. 1992 to Sept. 1993	1,047	185
Oct. 1993 to Sept. 1994	1,099	190
Oct. 1994 to Sept. 1995	581	176
Oct. 1995 to Sept. 1996	628	245
Oct. 1996 to Sept. 1997	632	197
Oct. 1997 to Sept. 1998	422	186
Oct. 1998 to Sept. 1999	855	272
Oct. 1999 to Sept. 2000	1,414	329
Oct. 2000 to Sept. 2001	1,312	—
Oct. 2001 to Sept. 2002	1,262	—
Oct. 2002 to Sept. 2003	1,543	—
Total	12,889	3,416
Average per period	921	201

Source: For protests, Provea, *Situación de los derechos humanos* (annual reports); for news items, El Bravo Pueblo database (Universidad Central de Venezuela, Caracas).

coups of February and November 1992. From then on, the Pérez government rapidly lost political support until May 1993, when the National Congress dismissed the president after the Supreme Court had decided that there were sufficient grounds for charging him with misappropriation of public funds. He was replaced by an interim government headed by the historian Ramón J. Velásquez until Rafael Caldera assumed the presidency as a result of the December 1993 elections. During these years the daily average number of protests rises to 2.75. The second peak, between 1999 and 2003, coincides with the years of the Chávez government. In this case, a new political elite was trying to implement an alternative project for the country, generating massive demonstrations both in favor of and against it. In these years the daily average rises to 3.50. This would appear to indicate a degree of mobilization appreciably higher than before, although it must be taken into account

TABLE 2
Nature of the Protests, 1983–2000

Year	Total News Items	Conventional		Confrontational		Violent	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
Oct. 1983 to Sept. 1984	283	164	57.9	98	34.6	21	7.4
Oct. 1984 to Sept. 1985	157	105	66.9	40	25.5	12	7.6
Oct. 1985 to Sept. 1986	191	154	80.6	33	17.3	4	2.1
Oct. 1986 to Sept. 1987	124	72	58.1	14	11.3	38	30.6
Oct. 1987 to Sept. 1988	121	81	66.9	22	18.2	18	14.9
Oct. 1988 to Sept. 1989	225	86	38.2	63	28.0	76	33.8
Oct. 1989 to Sept. 1990	156	51	33.7	74	47.4	31	19.9
Oct. 1990 to Sept. 1991	220	111	50.5	53	24.1	56	25.5
Oct. 1991 to Sept. 1992	159	16	10.6	71	44.7	72	45.3
Oct. 1992 to Sept. 1993	185	45	24.3	70	37.8	70	37.8
Oct. 1993 to Sept. 1994	190	54	28.4	70	36.8	66	34.7
Oct. 1994 to Sept. 1995	176	61	34.7	50	28.4	65	36.9
Oct. 1995 to Sept. 1996	245	45	18.4	104	42.4	96	39.2
Oct. 1996 to Sept. 1997	197	84	42.6	67	34.0	46	23.4
Oct. 1997 to Sept. 1998	186	79	42.5	70	37.6	37	19.9
Oct. 1998 to Sept. 1999	272	42	15.4	172	63.2	58	21.3
Oct. 1999 to Sept. 2000	329	153	46.5	125	38.0	51	15.5
Total	3,416	1,403	—	1,196	—	817	—
Average per period	201	83	41.3	70	34.8	48	23.9

Source: El Bravo Pueblo database.

that for 2001–2002 Provea for the first time includes work stoppages, thus increasing the average.

For the years that it covers, the BDEBP registers a total of 3,416 news items on protests, an average of 0.55 per day. This database also indicates years of activity peaks. The first is 1983. In February, on what has become known as “Black Friday,” the Luis Herrera government devalued the national currency and introduced exchange controls, in the process revealing the dimensions of the economic crisis and contributing to the victory of the opposition candidate, Jaime Lusinchi, in the presidential elections in December. As in the case of Provea, the BDEBP reflects the peak provoked by the Caracazo and the increase in mobilizations during the early years of the Chávez administration.

In the BDEBP, the protests reviewed are classified in terms of three categories: conventional, confrontational, and violent (Table 2). Conventional

actions are everyday protests that do not provoke fear or anxiety among participants, observers, and the authorities. Confrontational actions are those that provoke fear and anxiety but without involving physical aggression or damage to property and include roadblocks, unauthorized combative demonstrations and marches, and hunger strikes. Finally, violent protests are those that provoke damage or destruction of public or private property and/or affect the physical integrity of persons, whether participants or not. The greater incidence and visibility of confrontational and violent protests—particularly confrontational ones—indicate that the society is undergoing a period of turbulence and/or socio-political transformation (Tarrow, 1989).

The first striking fact is that the items reporting violent protests, less than 10 percent of the total in the earliest years of the series, consistently register two-digit percentages after 1986. Violence peaks in 1991–1992 and 1992–1993 as a result of the political crisis during the second Pérez government and again in 1995–1996. This second period corresponds to the implementation of the economic adjustment program known as the Agenda Venezuela. From then on, the tendency is for the percentage of violent protests to decline.

The definition of “violent protests” adopted by the BDEBP naturally includes those subject to state repression. Provea, as an organization dedicated to the defense of human rights, offers a detailed, year-by-year report on the mobilizations that were repressed by the state.² According to the Provea information, during Pérez’s second term (1989–1993) violent state repression of protest was commonplace. One of every three nonviolent protests was repressed, with an elevated cost in human lives. In addition to the atrocious repression during the Caracazo, 26 deaths were registered as a result of peaceful demonstrations in the days following the abortive February 1992 coup.

Modifications in the patterns of official response to peaceful demonstrations were evident during the second Caldera administration (1994–1998), when levels of repression were lower. At the same time, the emergence of new political actors in the regional and local governments led to changes of attitude toward peaceful demonstrations. The criminalization of protest, which dated back to the 1960s, when it formed part of the response to the armed struggle, now became less common as a result of new efforts to submit cases of repression to a body of rules (López Maya, 2003b). Toward the middle of Caldera’s term the proportion of demonstrations repressed had fallen to one of every six. Deaths in public demonstrations were also fewer, and in 1996 not one was registered. There was also less evidence of the use of arms in demonstrations.

With the Chávez government, there has been greater recognition of the right to protest, and this has been institutionalized. In 1998–1999, 1 of every 25 protests was repressed, in 2000–2001, 1 of every 28, and in 2002–2003, 1 of every 36. The use of arms in public demonstrations continued to fall and, in fact, was prohibited by the 1999 Constitution. During the first five years of the current government, there were five deaths in public demonstrations.³ This tendency evidently contributed to a reduction in the incidence of violence, although the most recent report registers another increase in violence in 2002–2003 related not so much to state repression as to the acute political confrontation associated with the April coup and its aftermath.

Protests classified as “confrontational” in the BDEBP are an increasing proportion of the total in the years after 1988–1989. In the previous period the proportion had been an average of 21.4 percent. From 1988–1989 to 2000 it rose to an average of 38.5 percent. During the second half of the 1990s, at the same time as violent protests became less frequent, those defined as confrontational accounted for 43 percent. Finally, the incidence of conventional protests is in almost inverse relation to that of violent ones. At the outset of the series, conventional protests account for far more than half the total, but their proportion falls during the years of political turbulence in the early 1990s, recovering once again in the second half of the decade.

The BDEBP also classifies the protests on the basis of their motives, using more than 90 different categories. For present purposes, we have classified them into two broad groups: socioeconomic and civic/political (Table 3). (The lack of coincidence between these totals and those registered in Table 2 is due to the fact that a protest may have various motives and may therefore be registered in both of our two broad groups.) An overwhelming majority of the protests are motivated by socioeconomic concerns. However, in a few isolated years those that reflect civic and political concerns account for more than a third of the total. Although a detailed analysis of this phenomenon is beyond the scope of this article, it is clear that the dates coincide with moments in which there were particularly high levels of political agitation. Between 1986 and 1988 there were important mobilizations in favor of political reforms, particularly those related to the process of decentralization. These demonstrations helped to produce the climate necessary for support of the reforms recommended by the Comisión Presidencial para la Reforma del Estado (Presidential Commission for the Reform of the State—COPRE) that led to the legislation favoring decentralization (Gómez Calcaño and López Maya, 1990). The first abortive military coup took place in 1992, and 1998–1999, the first year of the Chávez government, was subject to massive mobilizations in favor of the constituent assembly.

TABLE 3
Motives of the Protests, 1983–1999

<i>Year</i>	<i>Total Motives</i>	<i>Socioeconomic</i>		<i>Civic and Political</i>		<i>Other</i>	
		<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Oct. 1983 to Sept. 1984	296	253	85.5	37	12.5	6	2.0
Oct. 1984 to Sept. 1985	174	151	86.8	18	4.8	5	2.9
Oct. 1985 to Sept. 1986	215	198	92.1	16	7.4	1	0.5
Oct. 1986 to Sept. 1987	135	71	52.6	62	46.0	2	1.5
Oct. 1987 to Sept. 1988	125	86	68.8	39	31.2	0	0.0
Oct. 1988 to Sept. 1989	312	223	71.5	82	26.3	7	2.2
Oct. 1989 to Sept. 1990	176	149	84.7	23	13.1	4	2.3
Oct. 1990 to Sept. 1991	54	42	77.8	9	16.7	3	5.6
Oct. 1991 to Sept. 1992	223	127	57.0	91	40.8	5	2.2
Oct. 1992 to Sept. 1993	221	159	71.9	60	27.1	2	0.9
Oct. 1993 to Sept. 1994	226	175	77.4	41	18.1	10	4.4
Oct. 1994 to Sept. 1995	204	142	69.6	49	24.0	13	6.4
Oct. 1995 to Sept. 1996	293	241	82.3	38	13.0	14	4.8
Oct. 1996 to Sept. 1997	218	178	81.7	32	14.7	8	3.7
Oct. 1997 to Sept. 1998	199	149	74.9	40	20.1	10	5.0
Oct. 1998 to Sept. 1999	304	195	64.1	106	34.9	3	1.0

Source: El Bravo Pueblo database.

To examine these motives in greater detail, we have divided each of the two broad groups into three subgroups (Table 4). The first subgroup (A) of the socioeconomic group includes motives related to productive activity such as the demand for access to land, subsidies, credits, taxes, and so forth. The second (B) covers those concerns related to public services, health, education, water, transportation, and so forth. The third (C) groups together the motives related to income: wages, collective contracts, pensions, work, and so forth. The motives of a civic and political nature are divided into a first subgroup (A) that covers human rights, repression, killings, mistreatment, and so forth; subgroup (B) that includes motives related to civil rights, justice, freedom of expression, laws, regulations, and so forth; and a subgroup (C) made up of explicitly political concerns such as election fraud, democratization, autonomy, and corruption. Within the socioeconomic group, the most important motives are those concerned with income and public services; between them, they consistently account for more than 70 percent of the total. In 11 of the 16 annual periods examined, the main concern is income. Within

TABLE 4
Motives of Protests by Subgroups, 1983–1999

<i>Year</i>	<i>Socioeconomic</i>				<i>Civic and Political</i>			
	<i>N</i>	<i>% A</i>	<i>% B</i>	<i>% C</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>% A</i>	<i>% B</i>	<i>% C</i>
Oct. 1983 to Sept. 1984	253	7.5	25.3	67.2	37	56.8	21.6	21.6
Oct. 1984 to Sept. 1985	151	12.6	30.5	57.0	18	33.3	16.7	50.0
Oct. 1985 to Sept. 1986	198	11.1	20.7	68.2	16	56.3	12.5	37.5
Oct. 1986 to Sept. 1987	71	1.4	42.3	56.3	62	85.5	6.5	8.1
Oct. 1987 to Sept. 1988	86	29.1	27.9	43.0	39	64.1	23.1	12.8
Oct. 1988 to Sept. 1989	223	32.7	34.5	32.7	82	70.6	18.3	8.5
Oct. 1989 to Sept. 1990	149	10.7	44.3	45.0	23	30.4	21.7	47.8
Oct. 1990 to Sept. 1991	42	26.2	54.8	19.0	9	44.4	11.1	44.4
Oct. 1991 to Sept. 1992	127	18.9	48.8	32.3	91	57.1	7.7	35.2
Oct. 1992 to Sept. 1993	159	26.4	26.4	47.2	60	45.0	16.7	38.3
Oct. 1993 to Sept. 1994	175	2.7	48.6	25.7	41	80.5	14.6	4.9
Oct. 1994 to Sept. 1995	142	7.8	50.0	42.3	49	57.1	22.4	20.4
Oct. 1995 to Sept. 1996	241	26.6	34.0	39.4	38	65.8	10.5	23.7
Oct. 1996 to Sept. 1997	178	21.9	36.0	42.1	32	59.4	31.3	9.4
Oct. 1997 to Sept. 1998	149	20.1	24.2	55.7	40	50.0	27.5	22.5
Oct. 1998 to Sept. 1999	195	18.5	33.3	48.2	106	47.2	14.2	38.7

Source: El Bravo Pueblo database.

the broad range of civic and political motives, in 13 of the 16 years the predominant theme is human rights, and in 11 of them these account for more than half of the respective totals.

To sum up, these recent years have been characterized by elevated levels of protest that, according to Provea, amount to an average of more than two demonstrations per day, including holidays and weekends, even (until the 2001–2002 report) without taking into account work stoppages, one of the most important forms of protest in Venezuela. After the mid-1980s, the percentage of protests registered in the BDEBP as violent is generally in the two-digit range, although there is a tendency for it to decline during the late 1990s, largely as a result of a change in the attitude of the state toward the right to demonstrate. The forms of protest characterized as confrontational were less than a quarter of the total prior to the Caracazo but subsequently rose to a yearly average of about a third of the total for the 1990s and reached 43 percent for the second half of that decade. This tendency suggests a society in which power relationships are undergoing a transformation. As we have seen, the most important motives for protesting throughout these years are the cost of living and public services, but toward the end of the 1990s protests

other civic and political issues begin to increase in number. Of the latter, the majority are related to human rights and the defense of citizens' personal dignity and physical integrity.

PROTEST SINCE 1958 IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

To examine the extent to which the characteristics of protest of recent years can be considered a novelty, we need to consider the evidence available on protest in the decades immediately following 1958. Juan Carlos Rey (1989), a renowned Venezuelan political scientist, considers the apparent passivity of the masses one of the basic reasons for the successful functioning of the Venezuelan political system during the decades that precede the period we have been discussing. With the overthrow of the Pérez Jiménez dictatorship in January 1958, there followed a series of democratic governments that were to be considered a model for the rest of Latin America. Shortly after the Caracazo, Rey argued that Venezuelan democracy rested on the consolidation of a limited number of large and highly disciplined political party organizations that fostered political stability by establishing among themselves a relationship that avoided zero-sum situations. The politicians who promoted the pact on which Venezuela's democracy was based had feared that, if popular demands were not channeled by the political parties, the system would be uncontrollable and could even collapse. Avoiding a zero-sum situation was made possible as a result of the resources available to the state from oil revenue. Thus, according to Rey, the stability of Venezuela's democracy depended on the demobilization and lack of participation of the masses. From what we have already said, it is apparent that, at least in recent years, the restraints on mobilization and participation have been seriously undermined.

In another influential analysis of the Venezuelan political system, Moisés Naím and Ramón Piñango comment that "the first decades of the democratic experience reveal a surprising absence of permanent open conflicts" (1984: 553). They argue that open conflict appeared not to be an essential element in the prevailing social dynamics and that processes provoking serious traumas in other countries had in Venezuela occurred free of major turbulence. As examples they point to the way in which the armed conflict of the 1960s gave way to pacification in the 1970s and the prevalence of harmonious labor relations.

Steve Ellner (1995) has argued, however, that, while such analyses have a certain basis, exaggerating them has led to the adoption of misleading and even erroneous conclusions. In contrast, the assertions by Naím, Piñango,

and others suggest that mobilizations were infrequent before the mid-1980s and scarcely relevant to an understanding of the dynamics of the society. It has also been argued that the protests during the initial stages of the post-1958 democratic experience were more ideologically motivated and less concerned with everyday conditions of life and that they were less intense and conflictive than in the more recent period we have examined (Ramón Escobar Salom, personal communication, May 23, 1997). To what extent are these assertions true?

The BDEBP is not yet complete in its coverage of popular protest for the post-1958 period, so we have opted for examining the information available for two years in each of the succeeding decades to establish comparisons. What we are interested in is the frequency of the protests, their characteristics, and their motives. Because the information available is not exhaustive, we have chosen not to adopt sophisticated criteria for the choice of the years to be examined. We have simply taken, for each decade, an election year and a nonelection year. We opted for 1958 and 1959, for example, because, apart from the general criteria, they cover the initial experiences of the recently installed political system, and for the 1990s we have used 1998 and 1999 (the first year of the Chávez government). As we have explained, what we are looking for is not statistical precision but rather an estimate of the frequency and characteristics of the protests.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom even among those of us who have studied recent popular mobilizations, the data do not reveal appreciable differences in the frequency of protests registered between the earlier decades and the more recent years examined in detail above. If we take the period prior to the 1980s (keeping in mind that the quantification cannot be considered precise), we have an annual average of 356 protests registered, appreciably more than what is registered in Table 1. Perhaps most striking is the information available for the 1970s: there are 843 protests in 1973, 744 in 1977, and 561 in 1978. Surprisingly, this suggests that even researchers such as Richard Hillman who have recognized the permanent presence of mobilizations and protests in Venezuela's contemporary history have wrongly assumed that, in contrast to the 1960s and the 1980s, the 1970s was a period of relative calm, with the conflicts cushioned by the resources derived from the oil boom (1994: 4).

The idea that protests and mobilizations were less violent in earlier decades is simply an illusion (Table 5). While it is true that in the initial two years of the democratic period violent protests represented less than 10 percent of the total, they were more frequent in the 1960s and 1970s. In addition, 1963 was particularly violent in that it was an election year in which the political forces committed to the armed struggle called for a policy of abstention.

TABLE 5
Nature of the Protests (Various Years)

Year	Total	Conventional		Confrontational		Violent	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
1958	358	230	64.3	95	26.5	33	9.2
1959	221	133	60.2	79	35.8	9	4.1
1961	211	132	62.6	55	26.1	24	11.4
1963	153	55	36.0	25	16.3	73	47.7
1970	353	22	6.2	268	75.9	63	17.9
1973	843	431	51.1	271	32.2	141	16.7
1983	163	148	90.8	8	4.9	7	4.3
1989	236	80	33.9	87	36.9	69	29.2
1998	168	77	45.8	68	40.5	23	13.7
1999	354	43	12.2	239	67.5	72	20.3

Source: El Bravo Pueblo database.

The confrontation between the Betancourt government and the rebels was intense and violent, and this situation undoubtedly accounts for the numbers registered. For the years covered, the numbers registered for confrontational conflicts are erratic. Understandably, by limiting our coverage to two years per decade, we can hardly expect to register any trends. However, there are two years, 1959 and 1970, in which confrontational protests are more than a third of the respective totals. Only on the basis of long-term and uninterrupted annual series could we identify prolonged periods of turbulence like that of the late 1990s, but the possibility cannot be discarded. Finally, the more conventional protests are a majority in six of the ten years we have chosen and, just as we have seen in Table 2, tend to be less visible in years that register elevated levels of political turbulence.

With regard to the motives for the protests (Table 6) socioeconomic concerns are once again in the majority (except for 1963), but the prevalence of this type of motive is not as marked. Whereas during the first six years registered in the table (1958–1973) the average percentage of protests motivated by socioeconomic considerations is 55.7 percent of the total, during the last four years registered it reaches 75 percent. This contrast appears to apply to the entire period from 1983 to 1999, as the uninterrupted series registers an annual average of 74.3 percent. The year 1963 is an atypical one in which, as we have already noted for periods of political tension, the relative weight of protests motivated by civic and political considerations increases substantially.

TABLE 6
Motives for the Protests (Various Years)

Year	Total Motives	Socioeconomic		Civic and Political		Other	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
1958	385	193	50.1	178	46.2	14	3.6
1959	234	128	54.7	86	36.8	20	8.5
1961	207	134	64.7	64	30.9	9	4.3
1963	154	37	24.0	99	64.3	18	11.7
1970	403	292	72.5	104	25.8	7	1.7
1973	851	580	68.2	167	19.6	104	12.2
1983	163	134	82.2	27	16.6	2	1.2
1989	325	250	76.9	70	21.5	5	1.5
1998	182	142	78.0	33	18.1	7	3.8
1999	392	246	62.8	143	36.5	3	0.8

Source: El Bravo Pueblo database.

TABLE 7
Motives for the Protests by Subgroup (Various Years)

Year	Socioeconomic				Civic and Political			
	n	% A	% B	% C	n	% A	% B	% C
1958	193	10.4	24.4	65.3	178	30.0	7.3	60.7
1959	128	6.3	21.1	72.7	86	50.0	18.6	31.4
1961	134	16.4	30.6	53.0	64	29.7	14.1	56.3
1963	37	2.7	16.2	81.0	99	12.1	2.0	85.9
1970	292	4.8	49.7	45.5	104	27.9	45.2	26.9
1973	580	8.6	35.5	55.9	167	49.7	19.8	30.5
1983	134	16.4	26.1	57.5	27	81.5	7.4	11.1
1989	250	29.2	36.0	34.8	70	75.7	7.1	17.1
1998	142	25.4	27.5	47.2	33	60.6	27.3	12.1
1999	246	16.7	38.6	44.7	143	41.3	10.5	48.3

Source: El Bravo Pueblo database.

Looking more closely at the motives in play (Table 7), we find that concerns about living standards and public services account for more than 80 percent of the total, with those related to living standards the more important

of the two. Among the protests motivated by civic or political considerations, those that are strictly political (democracy, corruption, elections, politics, autonomy, etc.) are the most numerous in three of the first six years. This marks a difference from the post-1980s period, when concern over human rights was the most prevalent motive.

CONCLUSIONS

Popular protest, which has become such an important everyday ingredient of social experience in Venezuela since the 1980s, is much less of a novelty than many believed. The frequency of protests in earlier decades is similar to if not greater than that registered during the most recent decade and a half. At the same time, despite minor differences in emphasis, the motives for protesting are the same.

Nevertheless, it is important to underline the differences that we have detected. From 1958 until the early 1970s, there was a greater numerical equilibrium between protests stimulated by socioeconomic considerations and those motivated by civic and political considerations. From then on, the former are much more numerous than the latter. Furthermore, in the early years of the democratic experience, of those protests stimulated by civic and political considerations, those that are strictly political in nature are the most common. This evidently reflects the climate of political turbulence during the first decade of the democratic period; by the 1970s the hegemony exercised by those who had signed the 1958 pact had been firmly established. In Provea's most recent reports there are signs that we have once again entered a turbulent phase: during the past four years the number of politically motivated protests has clearly been increasing in both absolute and relative terms, and many of the protests that are presented as prompted by socioeconomic considerations are also politically motivated. Indeed, we are witnessing once again a struggle for hegemony that has yet to be resolved.

The resolution of the struggle for hegemony in favor of those who signed the political pacts at the outset of the democratic period strengthened the legitimacy of the system and of its principal actors. These circumstances, together with the oil boom during the same decade, explain at least in part the generalized sensation of social peace and harmony that is reflected in the notion of Venezuelan society as devoid of open conflict. This view lends itself to the exceptionalism thesis regarding Venezuelan society. The evidence offered by the BDEBP indicates that in the early 1980s protests largely assumed conventional forms.⁴ From a longer historical perspective, however, this was not a normal situation but rather a brief "truce." Historical circum-

stances of social and cultural exclusion that had not been resolved, together with the deteriorating living conditions of the general populace once the oil boom had passed, renewed the pressures for a new cycle of conflict and political struggle. Nevertheless, there are indications of changes in the political demands typical of the more recent protests. Since the Amparo massacre and, even more so, the Caracazo, there has been an advance in public consciousness and repudiation of violations of human rights.

Protest is and has always been an important aspect of Venezuelan society, and it is seriously misleading to highlight passive behavior on the part of the popular sectors during prolonged periods. What does change, however, is the role of protest in the dynamics of the society. In periods of struggle over hegemony, street politics contributes directly to a questioning of the established power structure, and this is reflected in changes in its characteristics and motives. In these situations it becomes more confrontational and violent and the strictly political considerations come to the fore. During periods in which hegemonic control is not in question and the system enjoys relative legitimacy and stability, protests motivated by socioeconomic considerations are by far the most common. At the same time, those to whom the demands are directed have far more room for maneuver. In contrast with the situation in the 1960s, when protest was criminalized and energetically repressed, thus contributing to spiraling violence, since the mid-1980s and above all during the Chávez government this criminalization has diminished together with the violence. As a result, the hegemonic struggle is now being waged primarily on the basis of what this article calls “confrontational” collective action.

Between the early 1970s and the mid-1980s, the Venezuelan state depended on extraordinary levels of oil revenue to maintain protest at bay. Its capacity for overcoming conflict contributed to a disarticulation of attempts by independent popular sectors to organize themselves. Frequently, protest was a mere prelude to negotiations between trade-union bureaucrats and political parties or state institutions. Despite high levels of protest, this pattern could not open real prospects of creating solid social movements or organizations. However, with the sustained economic deterioration and the undermining of the legitimacy of the political system, especially during the late 1980s, the situation was transformed. Protest returned to center stage in the political struggle, and socioeconomic demands could no longer be countered by relying on the clientelistic and corporative mechanisms of the past. The conditions have been created for transcending protest and establishing an autonomous dynamic for popular movements and social organizations.

More recently, new elements that have not been discussed in this study have complicated this already complex situation. Since the last months of 2001, sectors of the upper and middle classes have also taken to the streets.

This new ingredient has made protest even more visible than before because these new sectors have important economic resources and, above all, are backed by the private mass media, which share and promote the aims of the mobilizations. These sectors also face the challenge of improving and consolidating their relationship with the Venezuelan state and democracy.

In the course of this article, we have attempted to shed some light on the complexity of the relationship between state and society in Venezuela as expressed by street politics. By examining the different modalities, characteristics, and motives of the protests from a historical perspective, we have been able to identify continuities and changes in the interaction between popular actors and those closer to the seats of power. We have seen how, in certain periods, the patterns of protest reflect the relative legitimacy of the political system and its actors. The application of this same methodology on a wider scale in Latin America could provide comparative insights capable of enriching the analysis of this relationship, particularly now that street politics is assuming novel, creative forms throughout the continent.

NOTES

1. For analysis of the Caracazo, see Coronil and Sturski (1991) and López Maya (2003a).
2. López Maya (2003b) analyzes the relationship between repression and the increasing violence of the demonstrations.
3. The deaths occasioned by state repression during the April 11, 2002, coup and during the following two days are not included in the totals of the Provea report, in the case of April 11 because to date there is no reliable account of what happened and in the case of April 12 and 13 because the responsibility lies with the de facto Carmona regime. In the 2002–2003 report four deaths are registered, although three of them are the result of repression of a violent demonstration.
4. In addition to 1983, which is registered in Table 5 with 5.1 percent for violent protests, the Base de Datos El Bravo Pueblo indicates 7.3 percent for 1981 and 5 percent for 1982.

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