# Democratizing the Republic by instituting the informal: the irregularity of the barrios of Caracas and Venezuelan democratization (1941-1964)

Serge Ollivier

# Democratizing the Republic by Instituting the Informal: Barrio Irregularity in Caracas and Venezuelan Democratization (1941-1964)

**Serge Ollivier**

In 1987, Venezuela's legislative body called for the country's informal urban areas – called *barrios* -- to be integrated into the urban fabric within the framework of the Ley Orgánica de Ordenación Urbanistica (Organic Law for Urban Development).[1] This new law assigned local urban planning authorities the task of identifying "areas of uncontrolled growth" with the aim of "incorporating them into the urban structure."[2] It marked the first step towards the regularization of urban planning and land markets in these neighbourhoods, which were already home to almost half of the country's urban population.[3] The *barrios* were by this point not just a major feature of urban space but also a major focus of attention for public authorities and elected representatives. The 1987 law was not the first time that authorities had recognized the barrios' existence, but it was novel in extending official recognition to the domain of civil law, marking the beginning of a transformation of the legal and institutional environment in which the *barrios* had developed, which was described by the jurists Rogelio Pérez Perdomo and Pedro Nikken in 1979 as an "official informal order."[4]

This apparently paradoxical order was characterized on the one hand by the illegality of *barrio* housing and on the other by the recognition such housing gained through the actions of local executive authorities. Until the end of the 20th century, the irregularity of the *barrios* was multifaceted. Most of the housing in these neighbourhoods was built as a result of "urban land invasions" (irregular land occupations), which meant there was no legal guarantee of ownership for the occupier/builders.[5] In addition, the housing was often illegal because it did not comply with building regulations, which made it unregistrable and rendered its rental unlawful. However, municipal authorities, public legal aid services, and public urban planning authorities would often operate outside the dictates of civil law and the legal market to provide support for *barrio* housing through urban service provision and efforts to prevent or resolve land conflicts.

For observers in the late 1970s such as Pérez Perdomo and Nikken, this *contra legem* support for the *barrios* from official bodies and their various representatives was characteristic of the electoral and institutional system of the 4th Republic of Venezuela (1958–1999).[6] Prior to democratization in1958, various administrations had pursued—albeit ineffectively—a policy of *barrio* regularization. These attempts had taken two forms. One,

---

[1] While the word *barrios* means "neighbourhoods" in Spanish, it has evolved to mean "slums" in Venezuela. This term has been generically applied since the 20th century to all working-class neighbourhoods with buildings characterized by a range of irregularities (in terms of real estate, the law, construction).

[2] Republic of Venezuela, "Ley Orgânica de Ordenacion Urbanîstica," *Gaceta Oficial*, no. 33.868, 16 December 1987. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from Venezuelan sources have been translated into English via French.

[3] Between 40% and 60% of the inhabitants of the Venezuelan capital of Caracas lived in the *barrios* at this time, that is between 1.1 and 1.5 million people. Teolinda Bolívar, "Los Agentes Sociales Articulados a la Producción de los Barrios de Ranchos," *Coloquio Vivienda*, Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1, no. 1, Caracas CDCH-UCV, 1989, p. 146; Antonio De Lisio, "La evolución urbana de Caracas. Indicadores e interpretaciones sobre el desarrollo de la interrelación ciudad-naturaleza," *Revista geográfica venezonala* 42, no. 2 (2001): 215; Teolinda Bolívar and Yves Pedrazzini, "La Venezuela urbana: Una mirada desde los barrios," *Revista Bitácora Urbano Territorial* 12, no. 1 (January–June 2008): 64.

[4] Pedro Nikken and Rogelio Pérez Perdomo, *Derecho y propiedad de la vivienda en los barrios de Caracas* (Caracas: UCV, 1979), 81.

[5] Records show that only 28.2% of the *barrios* housing was freehold in 1973. See Kenneth L. Karst, Murray L. Schwartz, and Audrey J. Schwartz, *The Evolution of Law in the Barrios of Caracas* (Los Angeles: Latin American Center, University of California, 1973), 98. In actual fact, as these authors pointed out, it is possible that none of the land was freehold because the validity of the titles was not proven.

[6] Pedro Nikken and Rogelio Pérez Perdomo, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

notably implemented by the social democratic governments of 1945 to 1948 (the so-called Trieno Adeco), was focused on installing utilities and urban amenities and officially registering the *barrios* located on land deemed suitable for construction. The other, implemented by the military junta of 1951 to 1958, was aimed at expulsion and demolition. These two diametrically opposed policies were then followed by another, completely different approach from 1958 onwards.

This chapter aims to show that the democratization of the Venezuelan political system in the early years of the Fourth Republic led to the public authorities' de facto abandonment of the policy of legally regularizing these informal neighbourhoods. This evolution is examined here from a dual perspective. Systemically it is analysed as the development of a sui generis and eminently politicized way of constructing the popular city -- the *barrios*-- which were at once legally irregular and an enduring feature of their social and political environment. Historically, especially in Caracas, the policy evolution resulted from social and political tensions that made the association of the barrios with the nascent democratic regime an obstacle to political stabilization for the new elites in power.

From 1958 onwards, the Venezuelan capital saw a simultaneous shift towards a political regime of representative democracy and an "official informal" regime that governed the production of the popular city. This twofold shift was largely a consequence of the city's meteoric economic and demographic growth. The Venezuelan economy had been revolutionized by the oil industry in the 1920s and Caracas had captured oil revenues and the profits derived from their investment. The tensions created by this process came to a head under the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1952–1958), who sought to take advantage of the oil boom to transform Caracas into a beacon of modernity.

Pérez Jiménez's fall on 23 January 1958 marked the invention of mass politics in Venezuela's political landscape. Transitional leaders replaced the policy of eradicating the *barrios* with support for land invasions during the first months of 1958. Official support was improvised, organized, and structured in conjunction with the deployment of the democratic parties' networks among the popular sectors. Communist and social democratic municipal councillors had already pursued this policy a decade earlier under the social democrat government of Acción Democrática (AD) from 1945 to 1948. Following a chronology that was itself political, the policy was thus reconstituted and consolidated in two stages. In a context of great political uncertainty marked by the Cold War, it was reshaped first in 1958 for the benefit of Marxist militants and then from 1960 to 1964 for the benefit of a resurgent AD,.

By 1963, the "official informal order" that characterized the *barrios* had become established. It was justified and euphemized in official speeches and documents through the lexical field of "community development," a fitting credo for a new Republic that was being constructed in partnership with the United States and the United Nations.

However, this "official informal order" was, in practice, anything but orderly. It was a form of day-to-day politics comprised of ad hoc official protection and urban improvements that were implemented through partisan cronyism or in response to resident mobilization. Its erratic nature was accentuated throughout this period by the administrative jumble of three levels of public jurisdiction that were involved in the management of informal urbanization in the Metropolitan District of Caracas: first the two municipal councils (the Departamento Libertador to the west and the Distrito Sucre to the east); then, from the 1950s forward, the two federated states (the Federal District in the west and the state of Miranda in the east); and finally the Metropolitan Area of Caracas, a third level of governance that emerged in response to the growth of the urban area beyond the borders of the Federal District and the federal state.

This chapter examines the historical process through which the informal construction of Caracas's barrios became officialized, drawing on an archival corpus that allow a comparative study of official discourses and local practices. An analysis of official documentation (legal

texts, government reports, public speeches) is complemented by an examination of the local press, oral sources, the archives of communist activists, and early social science research on informal districts.

## *1941–1958: From the* Campaña *to the* Guerra contra los ranchos

In 1935, Venezuela entered a twenty-three-year phase of accelerated modernization and political conflict over an uncertain democratization. Throughout the presidencies of the military leaders López Contreras (1936–1941) and Medina Angarita (1941–1945), and in the subsequent periods of El Trieno Adeco (1945–1948) and the military regime (1948–1958), Caracas was both the center of the country's political reconfigurations and the privileged object of modernizing efforts.[7] The capital's informal urbanization gradually became a public issue during this period, owing to its massification and the fact that it did not fit with the various regimes' modernization plans. According to Juan José Martín Frechilla and Beatriz Meza, who have studied the evolution of official positions on the *barrios* prior to 1958, three major features characterize this period: [8] 1) the emergence, classification, and quantification of the problem of informal urbanization, which was mainly characterized (and discredited) according to building type (the traditional shanty, known as the *rancho*) and location (the *quebradas*, or ravines, and especially the *cerros*, or hills); 2) the almost immediate discrepancy between a federal government discourse that promised to eradicate the *barrios* and the Departamento Libertador's management of their expansion;[9] 3) the radical shift, around 1950, from a draft federal policy drawn up under the democratic government in 1946 to regularize the *barrios* and install services in them to a policy of systematic eradication implemented by the military junta from 1951 to 1958.[10]

### *Ranchos in the Capital*

Unlike other Latin American capitals such as Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, and Buenos Aires, Caracas still had a provincial feel at the beginning of the 20th century. In 1920, it had a population of only 118,000. Venezuela itself was still sparsely populated, with fewer than 2.5 million inhabitants.[11] However, the sudden onset of oil exploitation strengthened the capital's economic weight and, consequently, its growth. By 1936, the population of Caracas had more than doubled to 258,000, and by 1941 it was 354,000.[12] In the space of two decades, the city's population had gown twice as fast as that of the country as a whole.

Between 1926 and 1930, Caracas experienced its "first boom in private real estate development [*urbanización*],"[13] when developers "with questionable property titles, ongoing

---

[7] The word "Adeco" is used to refer to AD. Similarly, "copeyano" is the adjective referring to the Christian democrat party COPEI.

8 Beatriz Meza, "Contra el rancho en Venezuela: de la campaña de 1946 a la batalla de 1951," in *Diseño y Sociedad* (2010), 48–57; Juan José Martín Frechilla, "Vivienda popular e iniciativa municipal en Caracas, 1908–1958 (O como algunos pioneros no estaban equivocados)," in *La cuestión de los barrios*, ed. Teolinda Bolívar and Josefina Baldó (Caracas: Monte Avila Latinoamericana, 1996), 189–201.

[9] Martín Frechilla, *op. cit.*

[10] Meza, *op. cit.*

[11] Venezuela, Ministerio de Fomento. *Cuarto Censo Nacional de Población*, 1920, quoted in Angélica Cedeño González, *Estructura espacial del AMDC año 1966*, Tesis de grado en geografía, Universidad Central de Venezuela, Caracas, 1984, 31.

[12] Venezuela, Ministerio de Fomento, *Quinto Censo Nacional de Población*, 1936, & *Sexto Censo Nacional de Población*, 1941, quoted in Angélica Cedeño González, *Estructura espacial del AMDC año 1966*, tesis de grado en geografía, Universidad Central de Venezuela, Caracas, 1984.

[13] Martín Frechilla, *op. cit*.

disputes, and no permits" parcelled out irregular, unserviced land across "the flat areas and hills of the parish of Sucre," located in the west of the Federal District.[14] Despite fraudulent sales and permanent tweaks in the regulations, the official sources do not yet record any problematic land issues.

In 1929 and 1930, health and public works officials defined the illegality of these housing developments by the topographical site they occupied (the *quebradas* or the *cerros*), which had been declared unfit for development because of the impossibility of installing a water supply or sewage system. This prohibition was prescribed by two administrative bodies that came under the authority of the imposing Ministerio de Relaciones Interiores (Interior Ministry) and the Ministerio de Obras Públicas (Ministry of Public Works) and addressed to the governor, the municipal engineering department, and the municipal council, which were jointly responsible for enforcing it.[15]

At this same point, the shortage of housing became a social issue for the city council of the Departamento Libertador.[16] However, it did not officially begin to diagnose the problem until a decade later. Municipal authorities defined the irregularity of Caracas's popular housing as a land issue for the first time following the democratic and socialist opposition's victory in the 1938 municipal elections. In 1940, the commission responsible for land registry, common land, and municipal land administration classified the terrain occupied by *barrios* into three categories: municipal land with irregular status, land with questionable property titles, and federal land.[17]

During this same period, the Ministerio de Fomento (Ministry of Development) introduced questions about residential sanitary facilities into the seventh national census. The 1941 census thus officialized the traditional *rancho* as a category of housing, defined as having a straw roof, earthen floor, and an almost systematic lack of water or sewage services.[18] In a country where 65.1% of the population was rural, the census results showed that 60.8% of the housing was classified as *ranchos*, painting a "disconcerting picture of housing in Venezuela."[19] The *rancho* was associated with ruralism, backwardness, and above all a lack of hygiene. The fact that this type of housing was so prevalent was considered harmful.[20] The national census linked the housing problem to the *rancho* problem, especially in the big cities, where urban growth was mainly due to the intensification of rural emigration. The number of *ranchos* in Caracas rose from 5,437 in 1941 to 12,738 in 1944.[21]

By 1945, the housing problem in Caracas was thus officially associated with the *barrios*. The area covered by these informal settlements in the Federal District more than quadrupled in the space of a decade and a half (21 hectares in 1930, 94.5 hectares in 1941).[22] Public authorities took most of those fifteen years to define why the *barrios* were considered irregular, eventually honing in on three aspects: the site (steep, dangerous, and difficult to install services on), the property's legal status, and above all the types of structures used for housing. The *cerros* and *quebradas* as well as the *ranchos* were rejected mainly on the grounds of hygiene.

---

[14] *Ibidem.*

[15] The prohibition was drawn up by the Dirrección de Sanidad Nacional (national health directorate), which came under the Ministerio de Relaciones Interiores (interior ministry), and the Comisión de Estudios de la Red de Cloacas y Colectores de Caracas (commission for the study of Caracas's sewage and drainage system), which came under the Ministerio de Obras Públicas. Martín Frechilla, *op. cit*.

[16] *Ibidem.*

[17] *Ibidem*

[18] Venezuela, Ministerio de Fomento, 1947, T.VII, CV, quoted in Meza, *op. cit.*

[19] *Ibidem.*

[20] *Ibidem,* T1, XXII, quoted in Meza, *op.cit.*

[21] Meza, *op. cit.*

[22] Oficina Metropolita de Planeamiento Urbano (OMPU), *Crecimiento histórico de los ranchos de Caracas. Lapso 1949-1971*, Caracas, OMPU (folleto), 1974.

From a legal perspective, the *barrio* problem was entrenched when a new version of the 1942 Civil Code reaffirmed existing land law. Article 557 confirmed the "poder de atracción del suelo," which stipulated that the landowner was also the owner of any building erected on their land, unless the value of the building greatly exceeded the value of the land (article 558). According to article 788 of the Civil Code, the landowner could have the building demolished if the occupant was acting in bad faith, which was technically the case for the vast majority of *barrio* occupants because they had no valid documents.[23] This land legislation, which was weighted heavily in favour of the landowners, would remain unchanged until the 1980s.

Nevertheless, it was extremely complicated for landowners to evict occupants from the *ranchos*. They had to be able to clearly identify each "invader" and present evidence of their own continued ownership in the form of property titles. The Federal District's constitutional law of October 1936 also made any eviction subject to a declaration from the governor that the land invasion constituted a disturbance of public order.[24] The land tenure system in force therefore made it simultaneously impossible for occupants to legalize their *ranchos* and practically impossible for landowners to evict them. It gave the Federal District's governor and later the state of Miranda's governor the ultimate power of arbitration. Because local officials rather than the courts decided on possible evictions, arbitration was more political than judicial.

*1941–1948: The Beginnings of a Policy to Upgrade the Barrios from the Democratic Parties*

The period from 1941 to 1946 saw the formalization and politicization of the two opposing public responses to the barrios' irregular status, namely eradication or improvement. The eradication policy put the construction of new collective residential housing at the centre of its urban planning program and argued that the *barrios* should remain illegal. The improvement policy, on the other hand, valorized individual housing and auto-construction and championed the legal regularization of the *barrios*.

These debates crystallized around the largest development project of the time, the El Silencio *reurbanización*, which involved the demolition of a peri-urban residential area in 1942 and the construction of seven blocks of residential apartment buildings, completed in 1945. The project was managed by the Banco Obrero, a public fund set up in 1928 to fund the creation of housing for individual workers that ultimately evolved into a full-fledged agency for the construction of popular housing. Supported by President Medina Angarita, this modernist project was criticized by some urbanists and by the democratic opposition. The planners believed that new urbanites would fail to adapt to living in modern collective housing.[25] The elected members of the Partido Democrático Nacional—which became the AD in 1941—and the elected members of the Partido Comunista de Venezuela (PCV) rejected the project because it was too costly, not just for the public purse in the economic context of the Second World War but also for the city's most modest income earners, who would be unable to afford the mortgage plan.[26]

The elected representatives of AD, who formed a majority in the municipal council from 1939 to 1942, distanced themselves from the El Silencio project and instead focused on organizing an upgrade of the existing barrios. They created the Caja Municipal de Crédito

[23] Nikken, Pérez Perdomo, *op. cit.*

[24] *Ley Orgánica del Distrito Federal*, articulo 13, ordinal 6, V, quoted in Nikken and Pérez Perdomo, *op. cit.*

[25] Meza, *op. cit.*

[26] Martín Frechilla, *op. cit.*

Popular, a municipal fund to provide public loans to individuals to finance the construction of their homes. That same year, the council established its first Juntas Pro-Mejoras (executive councils responsible for urban development) at the parish and *barrio* levels as well as the Ligas de Colonos (settlers' associations). An AD (Adeco) leader named Gonzalo Barrios, also set up a humanitarian executive council called the Junta Pro-Habitantes de Puentes y Quebradas (council for the inhabitants of bridges and ravines).[27] During these three years of the AD/PCV majority in the Departamento Libertador's municipal council, the elected members established the first municipal public support agencies charged with installing services and upgrading the *barrios*. Their action focused on the *barrios* that were situated on land that belonged to the nation and had been purchased by the Departamento Libertador. The AD and PCV representatives advocated within the council for an extension of the *barrios,* which they saw as a better solution to the affordable housing crisis than the construction of collective dwellings.[28]

After the democratization of 1945, the Federal government took up their recommendations. The sudden fall of Medina Angarita on 18 October 1945 had put an end to a democratic opening that had been controlled by military generals, which gave way to the Venezuela's first social democratic government: the revolutionary junta led by Rómulo Betancourt. Universal suffrage and the secret ballot were introduced in March 1946, replacing the previous male-only, public voting system. The first national policy addressing the housing shortage was launched with the creation of the National Housing Commission on 14 January 1946 and a decree (no. 144) setting out the administration's objective to build 40,000 workers' homes over the next ten years.[29] A number of AD officials with experience at municipal level in Caracas, such as Gonzalo Barrios, steered the administration in the direction of a program centered on servicing and improving the *barrios* of the Federal District.

In June 1946, Alejandro Oropeza Castillo, the former managing director of the Banco Obrero and an Adeco official, submitted a general report on behalf of the National Housing Commission on the objectives of decree no. 144. This report was in fact a roadmap for a national policy for installing services in the *barrios*. It set out a "plan for the improvement of low-income housing" for households that were unable to meet the mortgage payments necessary to purchase a Banco Obrero apartment. This was the first time a national public body had officially acknowledged that there was a lack of public resources to rehouse residents from the *ranchos* and recommended that the existing *barrios* should be upgraded. The plan proposed that a local council, called a Junta Pro-Vivienda Popular, would be responsible for installing services, constructing foundations, and selling building materials to future occupants in each municipality that had signed a contract with the Banco Obrero.[30] The project's two objectives were to develop serviced land for the rehousing of inhabitants from the *cerros* and to provide materials to facilitate the construction of permanent houses. Known as the "anti-*ranchos* campaign," this project aimed to put an end to the *ranchos* not by demolishing them but by improving them through auto-construction.

In August 1947, Betancourt made reference in one of his speeches to an "emergency plan" to provide "building materials to poor communities … so that they themselves can rebuild their homes."[31] This plan was never implemented, even though it was probably only envisaged

---

[27] *Ibidem*

[28] *Ibid.*

[29] Meza, *op. cit*.

[30] Alejandro Oropeza Castillo, *Informe General [BO] (mimeo*). In INFODOC, Caracas, Facultad de Arquitectura y Urbanismo, Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1946 & Alejandro Oropeza Castillo, *Proyecto N° 6. VIVIENDA MINIMA [BO]* (mimeo). In INFODOC, Caracas, Facultad de Arquitectura y Urbanismo, Universidad Central de Venezuela, quoted in Meza, *op. cit.*

[31] Rómulo Betancourt, *Venezuela, política y petróleo* (Mexico: Seix Barral, 1979), (1st ed. 1956), 523.

for Caracas,[32] but it was the first time a federal government had officially supported a policy to improve the self-built *barrios*.

Betancourt's Revolutionary Junta and the National Housing Commission thus legitimized the action of the social democratic and Communist members in the Departamento Libertador's municipal council. The two members who were most active on this issue within the newly elected council, which was established in January 1948, were Eduardo Gallegos Mancera of the PCV and Raúl Díaz Legórburu of the Unión Republicana Democrática (URD). Gallegos Mancera proposed to the council that municipal technical assistance should be made available free of charge to the *barrios*' occupier/builders regardless of their land regularization status. Díaz Legórburu called for the Departamento Libertador to designate public land reserves and advocated for the decriminalization of *rancho* construction. Both men stressed on numerous occasions in their speeches to the council that the public authorities must recognize that the development of the *barrios* was now an irreversible phenomenon.[33]

The 1940s saw a considerable increase in emigration from the countryside to Venezuela's cities. The 1950 census results show that the country's urban population was in the majority for the first time, accounting for 53.8% of Venezuela's total population of 5 million. In particular, the *barrios* of Caracas had expanded due to the Adeco government's support for *rancho* improvements. In 1945, there were 78 *barrios* in all in Caracas, with 60 located in the Departamento Libertador and 18 in the state of Miranda in the east. In 1948, these figures had increased to 122 *barrios* overall, with 97 in Libertador and 25 in Miranda. In the Departamento Libertador alone, there were a recorded 20,953 *ranchos* in 1949, accounting for more than 20% of all the capital's housing.[34]

The rapid democratization during the El Trieno Adeco period thus coincided with a clear acceleration in the expansion of the *barrios*, a consensus between the social democrat (AD and URD) and Communist party leaders with regard to their regularization, and the creation of the first informal institutional tools—the juntas —to organize the installation of public services.

## 1949–1957: *La Guerra contra los Ranchos*:

The military coup of 2 December 1948 put an end to Venezuela's first social democratic experiment and, consequently, to any plans to regularize the *barrios*. The military government, first led by Carlos Delgado Chalbaud and after 1950 by Marcos Pérez Jiménez, deposed Venezuela's elected officials and suspended elections. Its drive to modernize was aided by a favourable economic climate marked by an increase in international crude oil prices. Venezuela's gross national product, boosted by oil revenues, increased by 95% between 1950 and 1957.[35] The country had the strongest economic growth of any on the continent during this period.

This new prosperity promised to turn the regime's modernist ideology, the "new national ideal," into a concrete utopia. Pérez Jiménez dreamed of making Caracas the

[32] Meza, *op. cit.*

[33] Martín Frechilla, *op. cit*.

[34] Oficina Metropolita de Planeamiento Urbano (OMPU), *Crecimiento histórico de los ranchos de Caracas. Lapso 1949-1971*, Caracas, OMPU (folleto), quoted in Meza, *op. cit.*

[35] For a good insight into Pérez Jiménez's economic policy, see Charles W Anderson, *Politics and Economic Change in Latin America* (Princeton, N.J.: D. Van Nostrand Co., 1967).

metropolis of the Caribbean.[36] Approximately 60% of national investment in public works was allocated to Caracas during his dictatorship.

Obsessed with modernism, the government decided that the *ranchos* had to go. Dictatorship emancipated the government from the electoral game, and new fiscal resources gave it the means to realize its ambitions. Popular housing in the capital would either be functionalist, modern, and collective or it would not exist at all. The Banco Obrero soon followed the regime's lead and, in 1949, declared "war on the *ranchos*." Its publications propagated condemnations of the *ranchos* on hygienic and moral grounds and claimed that life in the *barrios* made workers forget their "creative, active impetus."[37] Despite a 1951 report from a presidential commission of urban planners – which had been addressed to the governor of the Federal District and proposed that the government install urban services in the majority of the capital's *barrios* and allow the inhabitants to construct their own homes -- the military leaders and various administrative directors were persuaded that the *ranchos* should be eradicated.[38]

In 1952, Pérez Jiménez presented his "presidential plan for the elimination of the *barrios*." The eradication campaign accelerated in 1954 following the publication of a report that put the number of *ranchos* in Caracas at 53,360 and the number of inhabitants at 310,976, 38% of the capital's population.[39] In 1958, 750 hectares of *ranchos* were destroyed by force.[40] The regime built collective housing during this period, most notably the emblematic Dos de Diciembre complex, built between 1955 and 1957 and consisting of 13 superblocks and 52 apartment blocks that were intended to house 180,000 people.[41] The program was not completely achieved, but between 1951 and 1957 more than 23,000 housing units were built in Caracas, accounting for 70% of the national total.[42]

However, by 1957, it was clear that this strategy had not lived up to the government's rhetoric, mainly because the transformations in the capital had accelerated demographic growth. Between 1950 and 1958, the city grew from 704,000 inhabitants to more than 1,200,000, expanding to the east through the state of Miranda as far as the colonial town of Petare.[43] The concentration of investment in Caracas and its spectacular growth had considerably increased its attractiveness, because the capital's modernity and standard of living now contrasted more sharply than ever with that of the rest of the country. However, the high cost of the new popular housing units and the limitations of Caracas's job market precluded rural migrants from integrating into the regular housing market.

---

[36] Juan José Martín Frechilla, "La construcción de una capital: del primer proyecto moderno a la metrópoli desquiciada," in *Caracas, memorias para el futuro*, ed. Giuseppe Imbesi and Elisenda Vila (Rome: Gangemi Editore, 1995).

[37] Banco Obrero, *Reurbanización de Ciudad Tablitas Un nuevo mundo para la clase trabajadora Banco Obrero Vanguardia de la vivienda venezolana* (Caracas: Banco Obrero (folleto), 1952), quoted in Meza, *op. cit*.

[38] The report, which was headed by Leopoldo Martinez Olavarria, was commended in 1996 by Juan José Martín Frechilla. He highlighted the fact that the urban planners of the 1990s had finally come around to such recommendations. Martín Frechilla, *op. cit.* and Meza, *op cit*.

[39] Banco Obrero, *Informe preliminar sobre el cerro piloto presentado por el Banco Obrero y la Governación del Distrito Federal* (Caracas, 1954), quoted in Martin Frechilla, *Vividena popular, op cit*.

[40] Iraida Montaño, *Les invasions de terres urbaines au Venezuela: un problème…ou une solution?* (PhD thesis, Université de Paris Val-de-Marne, 1980), 155.

[41] Juan José Martín Frechilla, *Planes, planos y proyectos para Venezuela: 1908-1958 (apuntes para una historia de la construcción del país)* (Caracas: Fondo Editorial Acta Científica Venezolana, 1994).

[42] Martín Frechilla, *Vividena popular, op cit*.

[43] Antonio De Lisio, "La evolución urbana de Caracas, indicadores e interpretaciones sobre el desarrollo de la interrelación ciudad-naturaleza," *Revista Venezolana de Geografia* 42, no. 2 (2001): 203–26.

A large proportion (521 hectares) of the *barrios* initially managed to resist the bulldozers.[44] Many of the Dos de Diciembre apartments still lay empty, but most of the displaced *barrios* inhabitants rebuilt their *ranchos* further south or west, in the Federal District, or in the east, towards Petare. Hence, 53 new *barrios* appeared in the Metropolitan District of Caracas during the military regime.[45] In early 1958, some 220,000 people were living either in the old, densified *barrios* or in the new *barrios* located outside the city center. Overall, their housing conditions had deteriorated.

This meant that the sudden onset of a recession in the second half of 1957 had especially dramatic consequences in Caracas. Public investment fell sharply, which led to a scaling-down of activities, especially in the construction sector.[46] In January 1958, unemployment reached an all-time high in the city, and in the *barrios*, where a large proportion of construction workers lived, it hit 30%.[47] The social crisis delivered a double blow to the working classes in the form of mass unemployment and a housing crisis, which was exacerbated by continuing evictions and by the inaccessibility of the new collective housing.

### *From Mass Revolt to Voting en Masse*

On 23 January 1958, an uprising of the country's principal sectors succeeded in putting an end to the dictatorship. Throughout January 1958, there had been successive official pronouncements against a backdrop of riots in Caracas. While street protests had played their part in the political crises of the last two decades, this was the first time in the country's history that a regime had been brought down by crowds mobilized on the streets of Caracas.

The "spontaneous combustion,"[48] of 23 January 1958, as Arturo Uslar Pietri and many other contemporaries called it, must be understood as an eruption of social tensions that had been exacerbated by sudden mass unemployment in a city under construction. However, the social crisis did not disappear with the dictator, and the insurrectionary climate in Caracas, which was fuelled alternately by the crowds and by a military anxious about the transition, prevailed through all of 1958. At the center of the political arena once more, Acción Democrática (AD) had to contend on the one hand with the economic and military sectors and on the other with the PCV, in a Cold War context that was far more tense than it had been in 1945–1948.

This pivotal year has a major presence in Venezuelan national memory. The historiography has mainly framed it in terms of negotiations among elites, with a notable focus on the democratic leaders' success in forging a new political equilibrium through a carefully orchestrated political agreement among the major parties.[49] In Caracas, however, the reconfigurations were more profound. The new political openness and the first social measures proposed by the interim government's junta gave rise to a renewed wave of migration to the capital. In response to the social crisis, the junta proposed the Plan de Emergencia para los

---

[44] Esther Marcano, *Evaluación de las inversiones del sector público en las áreas de ranchos de Caracas* (Caracas: UCV-FAU, 1972) quoted in I. Montaño, *Les invasions de terres urbaines*, *op. cit*., 155.

[45] I. Montaño, *Les invasions de terres urbaines*, *op. cit.,* 158 and Fundacomun, *Inventario de los barrios pobres del área metropolitana de Caracas y el dpto. Vargas* (Caracas: Fondo Editorial Común, 1978), 19–20.

[46] Ocarina Castillo d'Imperio, *Los años del buldozer: ideología y política, 1948-1958* (Caracas: Fondo Editorial Tropykos, 2003), 58–9.

[47] See Talton Ray, *The Politics of the Barrios in Venezuela* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 16–7.

[48] Arturo Uslar Pietri, "El alba de la democracia," *Revista Billiken* (25 January 1958).

[49] This democratization was formalized in the famous Punto Fijo Pact, which was signed in Caracas by Rómulo Betancourt (AD), Jóvito Villalba (URD), and Rafael Caldera (COPEI).

Barrios. This was the first effective official, national public policy to install public services in the *barrios*. A transitional measure with lasting consequences, The Plan de Emergencia provided improvised official sanction to the informal *barrios* and marked the democratic transition with that hybrid stamp.

The question of the *barrios* was placed at the Republic's center stage during the course of a historic year for Venezuela. 1958 had begun with the fall of the dictator and ended with the reinstatement of national elections; in Caracas, it had witnessed the rise of an insurgent populace, and it ended with the vote of the citizen masses.[50] The results of the general elections of 7 December 1958 established the *barrios* as a burning electoral issue; in stark contrast with the popular vote in the rest of the country, Caracas' working-class voters had voted for Wolfgang Larrazábal, the president of the interim government.

*Caracas in an Insurgent Context*

Throughout January 1958, the opposition to Pérez Jiménez spread agitation throughout the city from their base in Caracas's popular neighborhoods. The Federal District's *barrios* were closed off to the authorities; the streets were barricaded, and the police were greeted by protesters who banged pots and pans and threw stones and Molotov cocktails if they tried to approach. Rioters from two popular neighbourhoods close to the city centre, Dos de Diciembre and San Agustín, made their way towards the city's business district on the 23rd.

In the parish of San Agustín, whose *barrios* bordered the city center to the south, the frontlines of the conflict had been crossed a number of times during confrontations with the Seguridad Nacional,[51] whose nearby headquarters were set on fire on 23 January.[52] The Dos de Diciembre complex, located just west of the city center, was another epicentre of the riots. The fact that hundreds of the new flats in the superblocks were still empty caused outrage. In these areas, opponents sought to benefit from the regime's concrete legacies even as they opposed it.[53]

On the morning of 23 January, when the news broke that Pérez Jiménez had fled the country, a massive crowd gathered in the city center. The occupations of the capital's main squares were captured in many photographs, taken throughout a historic day of festivities during which Pérez Jiménez's was burned in effigy.[54] The day was experienced as a liberation. But it marked not only the pinnacle of the collective mobilizations, but also their forceful legitimation. By the evening of 23 January, the street had gained a newfound political weight.

Demonstrations continued in the months that followed and soon seemed to bestow the Caracas masses with a particular political spirit. On 13 May, the US vice president Richard Nixon was met with an angry response from thousands of demonstrators during an official visit

---

[50] The 4th Republic of Venezuela, known in Venezuela as the Cuarta República or simply the Cuarta.

[51] This account of the events in San Agustín is based on a double-page spread in the 31 January 1959 edition of the communist daily *Tribuna Popular*. It commemorates the previous year's "battles" of San Agustín under the title "Valiente 'Hornos de Cal'" (valiant 'Hornos de Cal'). While the report was, of course, already a memory appropriation of the great event, it is rich in valuable factual details on the actors in this sudden working-class radicalization: "Valiente 'Hornos de Cal'!" *Tribuna Popular*, 31 January 1959.

[52] Ramón J Velásquez, "Aspectos de la evolución política de Venezuela en el último medio siglo," in *Venezuela moderna: Medio siglo de historia, 1926-1976*, ed. Ramón J Velásquez (Caracas: Fundación Eugenio Mendoza, 1979), 200; Carlos Gimenez, interviewed by Serge Ollivier in July 2013, Caracas; photographic archives of the Fundación Fotografía Urbana: http://prodavinci.com/galeria/?gid=51&pid=1483

[53] Alejandro Velasco, *Barrio Rising: Urban Popular Politics and the Making of Modern Venezuela* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 377.

[54] "18 horas de jubilo frenetico en Caracas por la caida del dictador," *El Nacional*, 24 January 1958.

to Caracas.[55] On 23 July and 7 September, tens of thousands of demonstrators took to the streets to oppose attempted putsches against the interim government. Contemporary commentators saw this as a continuation of the popular pressure for democratization.[56]

Hostile to the US government and pro-democratic, the street mobilizations also took on a social content. An unemployed workers' movement had been forming in the capital since 23 January, with thousands demonstrating every day in front of the presidential palace.[57] The secretary of the interim government's junta, Edgar Sanabria, would comment two decades later that the junta had been faced from the outset with "a sort of chemical binomial: either lead or silver,"[58] in other words, the choice was between a repressive policy (the "lead," symbolizing bullets) and a social policy (the "silver," symbolizing income from subsidized jobs). The junta chose the social option in the form of the Plan de Emergencia para los Barrios.

*The Plan de Emergencia para los Barrios*

On 13 March 1958, the Plan de Emergencia para los Barrios was proclaimed by the interior minister, Numa Quevedo, indicating that the problem was now considered a matter of public order. He announced "a basic emergency plan to solve to the extent possible the problem of unemployment on a national scale. … This plan, which will be coordinated by the competent bodies, will include the twenty states and federal territories … and will be implemented by 30 June, the end of the fiscal year, for a total sum of one hundred and twenty-seven million bolivars."[59] He added that the funds released should be used to respond to the major national challenges of improving roads, public hygiene, and education.

The 1953 Constitution was still in force, as was its legislative calendar, with a budget vote due in June. The Plan, which had been drawn up in the February, was therefore intended as an interim solution while awaiting the new budget.[60] On the radio, in the press, and in official documents, it was referred to as the Plan de Emergencia para los Barrios.

The Plan's contents were detailed when it was approved in July as a public policy inscribed in the budget and placed under the direction of the Ministry of Public Works. It was then officially renamed the Plan de Obras Extraordinarias (special public works plan) but was still commonly called the Plan de Emergencia para los Barrios in the press and in ministerial reports.[61] The Plan was placed under the direction of a young municipal engineer and Adeco activist named Celso Fortoul, who presented a report to the Ministerio in July that was at once an appraisal and proposed work plan.[62]

---

[55] Ramón Velásquez, "Aspectos de la evolución," *op. cit.*, 208–10. Archive footage from Universal International News showing clips of Nixon's brief official visit to Caracas is available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nvigX1doz2U

[56] Ramón Velásquez, "Aspectos de la evolución," *op. cit.,* 218. The daily *El Universal* reported ten dead and eighty-four injured. See *El Universal*, 08 September, in *Historia gráfica de Venezuela. El gobierno de Larrazábal: 1958*, Vol. 7, ed. Jose Rivas Rivas (Caracas: Ediciones Torán C.A, 1982), 173.

[57] Blas Lamberti, interviewed by Agustín Blanco Muñoz, in Agustín Blanco Muñoz, *Venezuela 1958: otra derrota popular* (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1991), 98.

[58] Sanabria, Edgar. Interviewed by Agustín Blanco Muñoz in Agustín Blanco Muñoz, *El 23 de Enero: habla la conspiración* (Caracas: Editorial Ateneo de Caracas, 1980), 223. Following Wolfgang Larrazábal's resignation from the junta to concentrate on his presidential campaign, Edgar Sanabria assumed the interim presidency of the Republic from 18 November 1958 to 18 February 1959.

[59] "Ministro del interior informo sobre plan mínimo de urgencia para solucionar el desempleo," *El Universal,* 14 March 1958. Can also be found in J. Rivas Rivas, *Historia gráfica de Venezuela, op. cit.* Vol. 7, 85.

[60] Ministerio de Obras Públicas, *Memoria y cuenta que el Ministerio de Obras Públicas presenta al Congreso nacional,* 1960, xiv.

[61] *Ibidem,* xv–xvi.

[62] *Informe sobre el Programa a realizar por el Plan de Obras Extraordinarias*, unpaginated, quoted in OMPU, *Censo Socio-Económico de los barrios del Área metropolitana de Caracas*, Caracas, 1967, (1st ed. 1959).

Fortoul immediately highlighted the Plan's lack of planning. He characterized it as a "reactive and interim" response aimed at "temporarily solving the problem of unemployment in the Federal District and the state of Miranda." He detailed the projected works and added housing upgrades to the list of priorities that the interior minister had outlined in March, which had included roads, public hygiene, and education. No major infrastructure project or urban planning initiative was envisaged. Only "minor" works would be carried out, such as sidewalks, road surfacing, sewers, primary schools, and police stations, and unregulated aid for the construction of individual homes.[63] The Fortoul report thus validated and made plain what the Plan had been about since March: the installation of public services in the *barrios*.

The Plan was effectively an unacknowledged employment program. Its sole objective was to create jobs in Caracas's construction sector. Thirty thousand new jobs were announced in July 1958,[64] followed by an additional 28,000 in January 1959.[65] The workers were hired by the Banco Obrero recruitment offices for six-month periods. However, only half of the workers were actually employed on construction sites.[66] Limited by the lack of planning, the administration was instead forced to let its employees work on upgrading their own *ranchos*, using materials that had been intended for other projects within the Plan.

When the accounts were submitted at the end of 1960, they showed that nearly half a billion bolivars had been injected into the *barrios* in 1958 and 1959.[67] The Departamento Libertador's *barrios* had benefitted from the greatest improvement, with new services installed and homes upgraded. However "interim" the Plan may have been, it represented a radical change in urban policy. For the first time, the *ranchos* had received substantial support from the state. In the streets of Caracas, Fortoul was soon dubbed the "people's engineer." For inhabitants, the urban development set out in the Plan represented not just a material contribution to their *barrios* but a public recognition of their permanence.

However, nothing had been altered in the legal or administrative order to favor urban land occupations, either through property law or through municipal decree. The reason for this was that there was no elected parliament in place and the municipal councillors, who had been elected in 1948, lacked legitimacy after they returned to office.

Nevertheless, the introduction of a non-legislative measure did contribute to a significant administrative evolution. On 24 February 1958, the Banco Obrero launched a campaign to reimburse the occupier/builders of the *ranchos* that had been destroyed during the dictatorship. It declared that it wanted to recognize the ranchos in legal terms as legitimate improvements —*mejoras* or *bienhechurías*— and compensate the occupier/builders, provided that these individuals had acted in good faith according to article 788 of the civil code. This was not a legal breach, as the Banco Obrero announced in the press that reimbursements would only be made to those who could present a rental contract for the land the ranchos were built on as well as the most recent receipt for rent payment and invoices substantiating construction costs.[68]

While most inhabitants of the demolished neighbourhoods were unable to present these documents, the Banco Obrero's positioning was nevertheless significant on several levels. Politically, it represented a complete reversal of Pérez Jiménez's eradication policy. Legally, it contributed to a recognition of the value of the *rancho* structure, provided there was a written agreement with the landowner. Administratively, the Banco Obrero abided by the municipal

[63] Ministerio de Obras Públicas, *Memoria y cuenta*, *op. cit.*, 1960, xiv.

[64] *Informe sobre el Programa a realizar por el Plan de Obras Extraordinarias, op. cit.,* unpaginated.

[65] "Comenzó ayer el reenganche de los trabajadores cesantes del 'Plan de Emergencia'," *El Independiente,* 13 January 1959.

[66] Ministerio de Obras Públicas, *Memoria y cuenta*, *op. cit.*, 1960, xiv.

[67] More than 210 million bolivars per year. Ministerio de Obras Públicas, *Memoria y cuenta*, *op. cit.*, 1960, xv.

[68] *La Religion*, 23 February 1958.

council's decisions for all *barrios* located on municipal land and encouraged the occupier/builder to obtain the landowner's agreement in the case of private land occupations. From this point on, land "invaders" seeking to establish permanent *barrios* always had to obtain the consent of either the municipal council or the private landowner. During the early years of the new regime, this served to channel land "invasions" away from private land and towards municipal land.[69]

The end of the dictatorship and its war on the *ranchos* combined with the introduction of the Plan de Emergencia rapidly catalysed colossal migratory pressure on Caracas. The growth of the *barrios* exploded beginning in February 1958. A year later, in January 1959, the Banco Obrero estimated that more than a hundred new *ranchos* were being built in Caracas every day,[70] particularly in areas relatively far from the city center, such as the parishes of La Vega and El Valle in the southwest of the city, where the population almost doubled in one year.[71] Since no census was carried out that year, it is very difficult to assess precisely how many people immigrated to the capital and settled in its *barrios*. In any case, between 1957 and 1960, the population of the Metropolitan District of Caracas gained almost 300,000 new residents, growing by more than 20% and reaching about 1,3 million inhabitants.[72]

By the time the Plan ended in January 1960, 60 new *barrios* in all had been established in the Metropolitan District of Caracas, mostly in the city's east (Petare) and northwest. More new *barrios* had been created in the space of two years than in the previous ten. For contemporary commentators, the phenomenon was very striking. The valley looked completely different. Many of the verdant *cerros* were suddenly pitted with stacks of wood and metal sheets. In 1959, the political rupture was also a rupture in the capital's urban history.

*Making the Land "Invasions" Permanent*

The dozens of new *barrios* that appeared in 1958 resulted from urban land "invasions" – that is, through the irregular occupation of municipal or private land. Although the authorities may have been caught unawares by the phenomenon's new scale, the invasions were neither spontaneous nor disorganized. Very quickly, each *barrio* -- old or new -- set up a neighbourhood junta. These became the inhabitants' interlocutors with the municipal and urban planning authorities. The *juntas* were inspired by an old Ibero-American tradition, but also by the Ligas de Colonos and the first Juntas Pro-Mejoras that had been created two decades earlier by the elected Adeco and communist party city councilmen in the Departamento Libertador.

The return to power of these parties stimulated the creation of the new juntas, especially since they were encouraged by the administrators of the Plan de Obras Extraordinarias. Fortoul's report called for the creation of a communal centre in every *barrio* to manage collective infrastructure and services. This was essentially dependent on the creation of a Junta Pro-Mejora. The report specified that in "*barrios* that have a Junta Pro-Mejora, this stage is very smooth" and conflated the future communal centre management committees and the Juntas Pro-Mejoras.

Although these plans remained hypothetical in the initial state of emergency following the 1958 revolution, the communal centres proposed in Fortoul's report served as a tool to gain

[69] Talton Ray, *The Politics of the Barrios in Venezuela* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 33–6.

[70] "El Rancho y El superbloque," Anexo XII, in Banco Obrero, *Proyecto de Evaluación de los Superbloques*, Caracas, 1959, 12.

[71] OMPU, *Censo Socio-Económico de los barrios op.cit.,* unpaginated.

[72] From 1,180,934 to 1,478,628 inhabitants. Source: Dirección General de Estadística, quoted in OMPU, *Censo Socio-Económico de los barrios op.cit.* (unpaginated).

recognition for the Juntas Pro-Mejoras. The success of improvement projects carried out in the *barrios* within the framework of the Plan already relied on the existence of a neighbourhood junta. The installation of a sewage and running water systems was only carried out in "*barrios* that meet certain minimum organizational conditions." The report did not add any new conditions with respect to the Plan's resource distribution. Rather, it clarified the de facto modus operandi that had been set out in March and attempted to give it a veneer of planning rationality.

These juntas had no legal status or even any official generic title. They were usually named after the inhabitants' demands, hence the Junta Pro-Mejoras (junta for upgrades). Sometimes they were called Juntas de Vecinos de Barrios (residents' associations) or, when the *barrio*'s permanence was not assured, Junta Pro-Defensa del Barrio (junta for the *barrio's* defense). Whatever they were called, their main role was to obtain support for local requests from the municipal council and the urban planning authorities. They would apply to the communal junta of their parish or directly to the Departamento Libertador's municipal council in the Federal District or the Sucre municipal council in the case of the *barrios* located in Petare in the state of Miranda.

The municipal councillors (*concejales*) very quickly resumed their role as the neighbourhood juntas' preferred interlocutors. The archives of Communist Party municipal councillor Eduardo Gallegos Mancera contain a list of the juntas' requests and his responses to them.[73] On his return to the Departamento Libertador municipal council in May (he had originally been elected in 1948), his activity was directed towards the Juntas Pro-Mejoras. He supported the requests that they addressed to the municipal agencies in charge of economic matters and land registration,[74] he approached the Instituto de Credito Popular (institute for popular credit) and the housing commissions to propose a construction program,[75] and he followed and coordinated the dealings of one particular junta with the Fundación de la Vivienda Popular (popular housing foundation), private companies, and the Plan de Emergencia.[76] All his interventions were conducted on the municipal council's letterhead.

Amidst the effervescence of 1958, elected municipal officials directed the *barrio* inhabitants towards the appropriate public bodies and helped to legitimize their actions, even when the *rancho* in question occupied "invaded" land. Their archives provide information both on the prevalence of the municipal council in Caracas's revitalized democracy and on the dynamism of the ever-expanding *juntas de barrio*.

### *From the Barrio Juntas to the Barrio Vote*

Each junta was politicized from its inception. At least one of the local leaders in every junta was affiliated to a political party. Any petitions or letters of request from a *barrio* came from its junta. They were systematically addressed by the junta's president to a municipal councillor belonging to the same party. The relations between the two entities thus fell within the domain of partisan sociabilities. These militant links dated back to the creation of the first

[73] Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, Partido Comunista de Venezuela, Caja 5.

[74] These requests came from the El Millo and Los Mecedores *barrios*, Letter from Gallegos Mancera to *Presidencia del Cuerpo*, Caracas, 2 June 1958. Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, Partido Comunista de Venezuela, Caja 5.

[75] On behalf of the inhabitants of the Las Brisas de Pro-Patria *barrio*, Report presented by Gallegos Mancera to *Concejo Municipal*, Caracas, 1 July 1958, Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, Partido Comunista de Venezuela, Caja 5.

[76] For the Turiamo *barrio*, Letter from Armando Vegas to Gallegos Mancera, Caracas, 14 November 1958, Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, Partido Comunista de Venezuela, Caja 5.

Juntas Pro-Mejoras on the initiative of the Partido Democrático Nacional members in 1938. From February 1958 onwards, they were re-established and systematized.

The politicization of the juntas became a key issue in Caracas politics on 16 June 1958, when the governor of Caracas, Colonel Vicente Marchelli, dismissed Fortoul as the Plan's director. Fortoul had become a political embarrassment in conservative circles, with which Marchelli was closely associated, but he had become extremely popular with the *barrio* inhabitants because of his implementation of the Plan. He was also, more importantly, an open member of the Marxist wing of AD, known as the "*muchachos*."

On 17 June, thousands of demonstrators descended on the Plaza Bolívar to demand that Fourtoul remain in his post. Larrazábal, president of the national Junta de Gobierno (governing junta), concurred with their demand. Fortoul kept his post, and Governor Marchelli resigned that evening.[77] The PCV's regional committee quickly understood the significance of this show of force. The Frente Pro-Fomentista was created less than two weeks later by a group of Communist activists,[78] many of whom had led the June 17 demonstration. The first post-dictatorship federation of Juntas Pro-Mejoras was born, and it was Communist.

In the wake of this, the Venezuelan Communist Party (PCV) rationalized and structured the link between the formation of a junta and entry into the party. The coordination of *barrio* activism responded to the inhabitants' expectations. In July, for example, activists from the La Ceiba *barrio* in San Agustín drew up a plan for political and cultural activities in their neighbourhood and asked their local PVC committee how they could "get in touch with the Juntas Pro-Fomento to find out how they are organized and how our comrades can join."[79] The local Juntas Pro-Fomento were organized during July and August under the aegis of Olga Luzardo, a journalist and poet in charge of the local PVC committee.[80] In August, with an eye on the general elections of 7 December, the PCV's regional committee set to work on expanding the party. It adapted the party's organizational structure to the urban fabric of the rapidly expanding *barrios*. Each PCV cell was to be given a map of the "precise zoning" of its local area so that it could be regularly redivided as new *barrios* were created or broke off from the old ones.[81] An "organization week" at the end of October concluded the restructuring of *pecevista* (PCV) activism in the capital and launched the last phase of the electoral campaign. All activists living in the *barrios* were required to contribute to what was described as "peripheral work," participating in the operation of their neighbourhood junta and trying to integrate it into a larger network of *Juntas Pro-Fomento*.[82] Communist activism, from that point forward, involved participation in the *juntas de barrio*.

In Caracas's popular neighborhoods, partisan networks had emerged emaciated from the dictatorship and the clandestinity imposed in 1948 on the AD and the PCV and then in 1952 on the URD. The Christian Democratic party, COPEI, which had remained legal during the dictatorship, was still a party of the wealthy classes in the capital.[83] The PCV was the quickest

[77] Velasco, *Barrio Rising*, *op.cit*., 78–9.

[78] "Fundan Confederación de Juntas Pro-Fomento más de doscientas organizaciones populares," *Tribuna Popular,* 28 June 1958.

[79] Report, *Celula no. 6* to the *Comité de Radio*, Caracas, 2 July 1958, Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, Partido Comunista de Venezuela, Caja 5.

[80] Resolutions, *Comité de Radio*, Caracas, 6 July 1958, Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, Partido Comunista de Venezuela, Caja 5.

[81] Bulletin, Comité Regional del D.F., Caracas, August 1958, Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, Partido Comunista de Venezuela, Caja 5.

[82] Bulletin, Sec. de org. del CR., Caracas, October 1958, Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, Partido Comunista de Venezuela, Caja 5.

[83] Ángel E. Álvarez, "COPEI: la triste historia de un partido sin vocación de poder," in *Los partidos políticos venezolanos en el siglo XXI*, ed. José E. Molina and Ángel E. Álvarez (Caracas: Vadell Hermanos Editores, 2004), 170.

to rebuild its networks in the *barrios*. The sources give no information on the total number of Communist activists in Caracas in 1958, but it is possible to estimate them at a few thousand, perhaps four thousand at the most, because 4,490 were registered with the regional committee in July 1959.[84]

Wolfgang Larrazábal left his post as president of the national junta and returned belatedly to the campaign trail on 14 November 1958. He was the URD's official presidential candidate and had accepted the PCV's support while also declaring unequivocally that he was not a Communist. In Caracas, the campaign quickly swung in his favour. The three main reasons for this were his prestigious reputation, due both to his personal charisma and his association with the Plan de Emergencia; the militant support he received in the *barrios* from the URD and the PCV; and the Caracas AD regional committee's fierce political opposition to their own party's candidate, Rómulo Betancourt.

This last, purely political reason had consequences. The AD's executive committee in the Federal District had been led since 23 January by the "muchachos," the leftist wing of the party, who had taken the reins of AD when it went underground in 1948 and all its founders either disappeared or went into exile. This young generation of Adecos (AD militants), led by Alberto Domingo Rangel and Simon Saéz Mérida, had honed their activism and leadership alongside the Communists in the struggle against the dictatorship. They aspired to radical social change and adhered more to Marxist-Leninist ideas[85] than to the social democracy that Betancourt wanted to build.[86] There was thus a deep chasm between them and the party caciques, who were two decades older and practically strangers to the younger militants when they walked back in and took over the party leadership in August 1958.

In Caracas, the *muchachos* led the party throughout 1958. Right up to the last day of the campaign, the AD machine never really supported the AD's presidential candidate; the *muchachos* had even supported Wolfgang Larrazábal. Fortoul, who had been appointed secretary general of the Caracas AD's regional executive committee in July,[87] had pushed Larrazábal to visit the *barrios* and the Plan's construction sites with him. The distribution of the Plan's resources thus fell to a heterogeneous front of anti-Betancourt activists. The revolutionary youth of AD, which effectively directed the Plan's implementation, made sure its largesse benefitted those *barrio* juntas that shared their political leanings toward the URD and the PCV.

URD and PCV activists, for their part, conducted a fierce campaign in Caracas in support of Larrazábal, specifically targeting the *barrio* vote.[88] With two weeks to go before the election, the PCV's regional committee organized a full afternoon of plenary meetings with the members of the *Juntas Pro-Fomento*.[89] Between the active support of the URD and PCV activists and the discreet support of the Adecos, the electoral campaign in the capital's popular districts almost exclusively supported Larrazábal.[90]

The former president of the national junta had thus proved unexpectedly popular. In addition to being associated with the benefits of the Plan de Emergencia, he had, during his

---

[84] Organizational plan, CR del DF. Caracas, 30 July 1959, Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, Partido Comunista de Venezuela, Caja 5.

[85] Héctor Pérez Marcano, interviewed by Agustín Blanco Muñoz, in *La lucha armada: la izquierda revolucionaria insurge*, ed. Agustín Blanco Muñoz (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1981), 293.

[86] Simón Sáez Mérida, interviewé par Agustín Blanco Muñoz, in *Ibidem*, p. 102 et p. 121. Lino Martínez, interviewé par Agustín Blanco Muñoz, in , Agustín Blanco Muñoz, *La Lucha armada: hablan tres comandantes,* Caracas, Universidad central de Venezuela, 1982., p. 22.

[87] According to Gabriel Moro, "Por que perdió A.D. en Caracas?" *Momento,* 5 May 1963, 30–1.

[88] *Ibid.*, 29–30.

[89] Bulletin, CR. del DF., Caracas, November 1958, Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, Partido Comunista de Venezuela, Caja 5.

[90] Moro, "Por que perdió A.D. en Caracas?," *op. cit.,* 30.

interim term as president, shown a great talent for communication. His "singular, trailblazing personality"[91] came into its own during street-level engagements, and he made sure to participate in as many as possible during his short election campaign in Venezuela's big cities. He ended his campaign winding his way through the *barrios* in the west of Caracas, standing or sitting on the roof of a car and wearing a type of shirt (*camisa llanera* or *camisa criolla*) that signified popular Venezuelan identity. This was the first time a major presidential candidate had openly and personally campaigned in the *barrios*.

The democratic transition was consummated on 7 December with a peaceful election and a voter turnout of 92.15%.[92] This democratic victory belonged first and foremost to Betancourt, who won 49.18% of the votes, followed by Larrazábal with 34.61%.[93] In Caracas, however, Larrazábal won the vote with 69.33% against only 14.15% for Betancourt, who took third place.[94] AD as a whole in fact took fourth place in elections for national congress and the president in the capital, overtaken by COPEI, the PCV, and the URD, with a landslide victory. Never had the electoral gap between Caracas and the rest of Venezuela been so great. In the city's popular sectors, Larrazábal enjoyed a landslide victory.

For politicians on all sides, it was clear that 1958 had redefined Caracas's political and electoral landscape. In a capital that was in a state of social and political turmoil, the new government identified the reasons for Larrazábal's popularity and used them to formulate a strategy to win over the popular electorate and forge a "policy of the masses" that could stabilize the new regime. The winning formula was clear. The government had to subsidize the installation of public infrastructure and services in the *barrios* via politicized Juntas Pro-Mejoras, and elected representatives at the municipal and even the national levels had to publicly recognize the legitimacy of these juntas' demands. Through the streets and the ballot box, an officially sanctioned and eminently political order that favored the *barrios*' recognition and permanence was therefore established without a single urban planning debate or legislative action.

*1959–1964: An Official Informal Order*

In February 1959, Betancourt was inaugurated as head of an AD/URD/COPEI coalition government. Yet this did nothing to calm the social and political situation in Caracas. Immigration from the countryside continued to rise, *ranchos* continued to be built, and the *barrios* continued to expand. In 1961, Caracas had 1,336,464 inhabitants, 5% more than at the end of 1959. In the eyes of contemporaries, the population of the *barrios* had seemingly doubled in those same two years: a parliamentary commission reported in 1969 that the number of people living in *barrios* had risen from 20% to 40% of Caracas's total population between 1959 and 1961.[95]

In addition, dual economic and political constraints had prompted the government not to reverse the policy of supporting the Juntas Pro-Mejoras. As the economic slump continued, the business community sought to revive activity. It blocked any urban and land reforms and therefore any regularization of the *barrios*, even though the inhabitants could not afford the

[91] Velásquez, "Aspectos de la evolución," *op. cit.,* 205

[92] Consejo Supremo Electoral, *Los partidos políticos y sus estadísticas electorales (1946-1984),* Vol. 1, Caracas, Consejo Supremo Electoral, 1987, 55.

[93] Consejo Supremo Electoral, *Resultad de las votaciones efectuadas el 7 de diciembre de 1958,* Caracas, Consejo Supremo Electoral, 1959*,* 5.

[94] Consejo Supremo Electoral, *Los partidos políticos*, *op. cit.*, 347.

[95] Acción en Venezuela, Departamento de Estudios e Investigaciones, *Informe para la "comisión especial del congreso sobre el problema de los barrios a nivel nacional" presida por el Dr. Raúl Ramos Calles*, Caracas, 1969, 3. These estimates were subsequently revised downwards.

mortgage payments for regular housing due to mass unemployment. Politically, the country was entering a new Cold War phase marked by the Cuban Revolution. The Marxist left, which had won the *barrio* vote in December 1958, took an insurrectionary stance against the government in 1960, soon mounting armed opposition. For Betancourt and AD, it was essential for the stability of the regime to prevent the *barrios* from becoming red bastions. They therefore decided not to abandon the Juntas Pro-Mejoras policy that had made Larrazábal so popular in the *barrios,* resolving instead to build on it and turn it to their advantage.

*Reassuring the Business Community and Ousting the Marxists from the Barrios*

After Betancourt's inauguration, Venezuela experienced a liquidity crisis and a period of sluggish growth. Between 1959 and 1961, GDP growth slowed to 1.5% per year. The construction industry was on its knees, and almost half of the workers in the sector, many of whom were *barrio* inhabitants, remained unemployed.[96] To boost hiring and honour the 1958 agreements with employers, the government introduced a "stimulus policy for the private sector"[97] and provided the country with the credit institutions and mortgage lenders needed to finance the private real estate market.

Venezuela's land tenure system, which protected investors and only allowed expropriations in exchange for compensation at the market price, was therefore maintained, making it prohibitively expensive to create new public land reserves in areas occupied by the *barrios*. This was the case, for example, with the Banco Obrero's attempted 1961 expropriation of the 500 hectare La Urbina hacienda in Petare, where a dozen new *barrios* had recently been established. The compensation requested by the owners, which was deemed to be legal, was far too costly, and the expropriation was cancelled.[98]

The 1960 law on the sale of subdivided lots further alienated the *ranchos* from the legal regime. While it protected apartment and house purchasers from developers, the law accentuated the illegality of *barrio* housing. Whether they had "invaded" or bought their plot of land, very few *barrio* residents had received the "documento de urbanización y de loteamiento" (urbanization and subdivision document) that the law required. The document was supposed to detail the land's property titles for the twenty years prior to its purchase by the current owner and also list urban public services in compliance with municipal decrees. Both were impossible to provide for the *barrios*.[99] Despite these measures, the business community was still wary of AD, whose Marxist origins they had not forgotten.[100] Betancourt tried to give them guarantees and implemented an austerity policy, which was rejected by the left.

The other major source of confrontation between the government and the Marxist left was the Cuban Revolution. The movement was very popular in Venezuela, where Fidel Castro had made his first official visit as head of state on 23 January 1959, barely two weeks after he marked the Revolution's victory with a triumphant entrance to Havana. Castro's revolution

---

[96] See James Hanson, "Cycles of Economic Growth and Structural Change since 1950," in *Venezuela: the Democratic Experience*, ed. John. D. Martz and David Myers (London: Praeger, 1977), 76–7.

[97] Under the Punto Fijo pact, employers' organizations had to be represented in the national coalition government. See Presidencia de la República, *Documentos que hicieron historia*, Tomo II, Caracas, Publicaciones de la presidencia de la República, 1962, 444 and 445 and Margarita López Maya, Luis Calcaño Gómez, and Thaís Maingón, *Del pacto de Punto Fijo al pacto social: desarrollo, hegemonía y actores políticos en la Venezuela actual*, Caracas, Fondo Editorial Acta Científica Venezolana, 1989, 109.

[98] See Luis Lander, *La vivienda popular en Venezuela La vivienda popular en Venezuela: especulación de tierras como un obstáculo para el desarrollo urbano*, Caracas, Cendes, UCV, 1976, 20.

[99] "La Ley de Ventas de Parcelas de 1960," *Revista del Ministerio de Justicia*, Año X, 36, Caracas-Venezuela.

[100] See Arturo Sosa and Eloi Lengrand, *Del garibaldismo estudiantil a la izquierda criolla. Los origines marxistas del proyecto de Acción Democrática, 1928–1935* (Caracas: Centauro, 1981).

greatly impacted the PCV and was a formative influence on the new Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria Revolutionary (MIR), which was founded in July 1960 by former "muchachos," who had definitively severed their connections with Betancourt. In 1960, the confrontation between the two Marxist parties and the government pushed the country to the brink of civil war. Following the breakdown in diplomatic relations between the Betancourt government and Havana on 11 November, the PCV and the MIR called a general strike. This evolved into an armed insurrection, particularly in the Dos de Diciembre district, which had been renamed 23 de Enero (23 January) in honor of the 1958 triumph against Pérez Jiménez.[101] The PCV and the MIR then opted for an armed struggle, which drove them underground in May 1962.

The Marxist left's entry into guerrilla warfare distanced it from the activism of the *barrios* and the life of the juntas. However, the PCV was able to draw on its Juntas Pro-Fomento to lay the groundwork for the uprisings of November 1960.[102] From 1960 to 1962, the insurrectionary climate prevailed, and the *barrios* were at the heart of governmental concerns. For AD, the rallying of the Juntas Pro-Mejoras was a key element in the struggle against Marxist subversion.

*The Barrio Transfigured into a Comunidad*

The government gradually phased out the Plan de Obras Extraordinarias between August 1959 and March 1960. Deprived of the Plan's resources, the *pecevista* (PCV), *uredista* (URD), and *mirista* (MIR) juntas faced an effective "embargo"[103] from the Ministry of Public Works. In November 1959, the PCV's regional committee noted "a certain decline in the *Pro-fomento* movement… in response to the government's decision to wind down the Plan de Obras Extraordinarias."[104] When the PCV went underground in 1962, it had already lost control of the majority of the juntas previously affiliated with the Pro-Fomento movement. Disillusioned by the armed struggle and the impossibility of service installation in their *barrios*, many neighbourhood leaders distanced themselves from the party.

The government's main aim was to link the Juntas Pro-Mejoras to the regime (including both the Betancourt administration and the AD). The project was led by Alejandro Oropeza Castillo, appointed by the president as governor of the Federal District in 1960. Oropeza Castillo was a longstanding AD official, a member of the party's hard core for three decades, and a loyal Betancourt supporter. His career had also made him a housing specialist. As director of the Banco Obrero during the El Trieno Adeco, he had authored the 1946 report supporting aid for auto-construction in the *barrios*. During his subsequent exile under the military dictatorship, he had worked as an international civil servant, heading up the UN's technical assistance office for Latin America. All the tools and personnel required for an informal, permanent, and politicized administration of the *barrios* were set up under his leadership from 1962 to 1964.

The intention was to administer not the *barrios* as such but rather their "community" of inhabitants, because the Juntas Pro-Mejoras officially became part of a community development policy rather than elements of urban planning or an urban policy per se. Community development (*desarrollo de la comunidad*) was established as an objective in the

[101] Velasco, *Barrios Rising, op. cit.,* 105–8

[102] *In Boletín*, Comité Regional del D.F, Caracas, 18 September 1960, Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, Partido Comunista de Venezuela, Caja 7.

[103] Ray, *The Politics of the Barrios*, *op. cit.*, 116.

[104] *Boletín*, Comité Regional del D.F, Caracas, 3 November 1959, Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, Partido Comunista de Venezuela, Caja 5.

1960 four-year national economic and social development plan[105] and was described, broken down, and defended in publications and conferences by senior civil servants who were integrated into the networks of the United Nations and its Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA).[106] Community development was characteristic of the new regime's developmentalism and quickly permeated the public discourse of its officials. The AD deployed its political/administrative apparatus in the *barrios* under this community development banner and effectively mobilized its discursive elements.

In January 1962, the government created a financial and technical lever for its community development policy called FUNDACOMUN, which was financed by USAID as part of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy's Alliance for Progress. FUNDACOMUN was a semi-autonomous funding agency that supported municipal councils in small-scale projects. Its president was appointed by the President of the Republic. Alejandro Oropeza Castillo took over as its head in 1964, shortly before his death in a plane crash that same year.

In the spring of 1962, as governor of the Federal District, Oropeza Castillo created the Movimiento Pro-Desarrollo de la Comunidad to coordinate the services of the Public Works Ministry, the Departamento Libertador's municipal council, and FUNDACOMUN. It was common knowledge that the Movimiento was an offshoot of AD. The governor appointed an Adeco activist, Ruben "Charlita" Muñoz, as its president.[107] Whether in his capacity as president of the Movimiento or as AD activist, Muñoz would always publicly defend AD[108] and told US State Department officials that the Movimiento was dedicated to "isolating and eliminating leftist groups" in the *barrios*.[109]

At the beginning of July 1962, a Comité de Remodelación de Barrios (committee for barrio remodelling) was created within the municipal urban planning office, again on the governor's initiative.[110] Oropeza Castillo oversaw this Comité as well as the Movimiento, and both worked hand in hand. As a municipal agency, the Comité applied for and obtained funds from FUNDACOMUN, which it then transferred to the Movimiento.[111] The *barrio* juntas affiliated to the Movimiento, which were often referred to as Juntas Pro-Desarrollo de la Comunidad, were also directly supported by FUNDACOMUN and the Ministry of Public Works, with whom they had signed contracts.[112] In 1964, the Movimiento expanded to the eastern district of Sucre and to the barrios of Petare.

By the time Betancourt handed over power in March 1964 to the newly elected president, his Adeco comrade Raúl Leoni, AD had become the leading electoral force in the *barrios* of Caracas. Its activists ran the majority of the Juntas Pro-Mejoras. These Juntas worked with public institutions and agencies, which recognized them as representatives of their "community."

---

[105] CORDIPLAN, *II Plan de la Nación*, Oficina Central de Coordinación y Planificación de la Presidencia de la República, 1960, Chapter V.

[106] Synthesized in Maritza Izaguirre and Carola Ravell, *Nuevo enfoque en el desarrollo de la comunidad* (Buenos Aires: Humanitas, 1968).

[107] The *desarrollo de la comunidad* remained a special interest of Charlita Muñoz for a long time. He published a book at the end of the 1980s to popularize the concept, but it had already largely fallen out of favour in public policy by that time. Rubén Charlita Muñoz, *Desarrollo de la comunidad: Definición, interpretación, teoría y práctica* (Caracas: Ediciones Centauro, 1987).

[108] Moro, "Por que perdió AD," *op. cit.,* 34.

[109] Ray, *The Politics of the Barrios*, *op. cit*., p.117.

[110] On 4 July 1962. See Teolinda Bolívar and Iris Rosas, "Los Caminos de la Investigación de los Asentamientos Humanos Precarios," in *La Ciudad: de la planificación a la privatización*, ed. Teolinda Bolívar, Juan José Martín Frechilla, and Alberto Lovera (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, Consejo de Desarrollo Científico y Humanístico Fondo Editorial Acta Científica Venezolana, 1994), 122.

[111] According to information provided to the US Embassy by Muñoz himself, again reported by Talton Ray. See Talton Ray, *The Politics of the Barrios, op. cit*., 122.

[112] See FUNDACOMUN, *Memoria y Cuneta, 1963* (Caracas: El Cojo, 1964).

Informal status meant parallel administration. The *barrio* space was managed through the "participation" of the "community" -- which involved the entry of local leaders in AD networks, which had been formalized as the Movimiento Pro-Desarrollo de la Comunidad. The Movimiento integrated all the stakeholders, from junta members all the way up to the state governor, and defined the framework for an informal, semi-professionalized, undeclared management of *barrio* urbanism. Operating in the spirit of community development – a programmatic tenet that was central not only to the Venezuelan regime but also to the UN and to Inter-American cooperation – and financed by a semi-autonomous foundation (FUNDACOMUN), the Movimiento coordinated and facilitated the administration of the *barrios* and the installation of services by the municipalities and the Public Works Ministry at the margins of both the law and of municipal and federal budgets.

*The Juntas: Informal Institutions for Producing the Barrios*

In 1964, although it stopped short of legalizing the *barrios*, AD pieced together all the political and administrative supports that had allowed them to develop since 1958, thus institutionalizing the "official informal order" noted by Pérez Perdomo and Nikken in 1979.

This newly institutionalized order led to an official *contra legem* recognition of the *barrios* through the links that united the Juntas Pro-Mejoras with public institutions and above all with the municipal councils. These links were based on Adeco cronyism (*compadrazgo adeco*). The informal administration of the *barrios* corresponded to a mode of management based on personalistic ties. The founding and consolidation of a *barrio*, the two critical phases in its creation, thus depended on the partnership of three classes of actors: the elected municipal official, the civil servant (generally from the Ministry of Public Works), and a resident leader of the neighbourhood junta.

The Julián Blanco *barrio*, located in the former La Urbina hacienda in Petare, is a paradigmatic example of the early stages of *barrio* urbanization and has been extensively studied by researchers.[113] It was established in the form of an urban land "invasion" in August 1960 by seventeen families. The three men who organized it and ensured its success were the founder himself, who set up his own *rancho* there, a municipal police sub-commander, and a municipal councillor, Julián Blanco. All three were Adecos.

The urbanization of the *barrio* did not begin until 1968. The founder had moved away in the interim, leaving a lethargic junta. It was taken over in 1966 by a new resident, Edmundo Rondón. At the age of 27, he already had a great deal of knowledge about how a junta operated from his experience in the older, more central Unión *barrio*, also located in Petare, where he had grown up. As head of the junta of the newly renamed Julián Blanco *barrio*, he worked with a senior official from the Instituto Nacional de Obras Sanitarias (INOS, which was affiliated to the Public Works Ministry), a representative from the city council, the city council's attorney, and the municipal councillor Julián Blanco, who was well respected among residents. In 1968, INOS installed a piped water system, Electricidad de Caracas extended electric infrastructure, and garbage collection commenced. In 1973, the junta persuaded INOS to install sewers and construct steps on the *barrio*'s slopes. Unión was now considered "consolidated" because it had been equipped with the basic urban services.

Both the foundation and the servicing of the *barrio* had thus resulted from an administration that was at once informal and official.

It was official because the junta and therefore also the *barrio* were recognized by the municipal council, which allowed the junta to contract with INOS and other urban planning agencies. In addition, the municipal council recognized the inhabitants' attestations of residence

[113] Iraida Montaño, *Les invasions de terres urbaines au Venezuela: un problème…ou une solution?* (Phd thesis, Université de Paris Val-de-Marne, 1980).

and good conduct (*constancias*), which were issued by the junta's presidency. More generally, the Departamento Libertador's Juntas Comunales and Sucre's municipal council would also provide land occupation permits, certificates of residence, and good conduct references for residents and their *ranchos*.[114] In the case of the Julián Blanco *barrio*, the municipal council's support also prompted private landowners to accept the occupation.

Yet the administration was also informal, because the *barrio*'s junta had no legal status. The president acted in his own name when contracting with INOS and other agencies, recruiting workers from among the inhabitants, and collecting water fees. Rondón, like many other Juntas Pro-Mejoras leaders, was a true junta entrepreneur, an unacknowledged specialist in the urbanization of his *barrio* and the management of its urban services.

Establishing and servicing this *barrio* as a permanent settlement was also an eminently politicized process. Every individual involved in the urbanization of the Julián Blanco *barrio* was an Adeco activist. They were all part of the Movimiento Pro-Desarrollo de la Comunidad created by Julián Blanco in the Distrito Sucre in 1964. The urbanization of the *barrio* was therefore dependent on intermediaries and elected representatives of the party in power. It was also subject to the electoral calendar; in the Julián Blanco *barrio*, the installation of services had been made possible by election-year cronyism in both 1968 and 1973. There, as in the rest of the capital, the foundation and servicing of the *barrios* progressed in step with the election cycle.

*Conclusion*

In the late 1970s, Pérez Perdomo and Nikken were surprised to find no court decisions concerning landowner/occupant disputes in the *barrios* of Caracas.[115] Although the *barrios* had remained confined to an almost unchanged state of illegality since the early 1940s, they had been built to stay, albeit outside the legal and judicial systems.

Beginning the 1940s, two major but contrasting shifts in the political and social environment had led to the *barrios'* official recognition: the legalistic and modernising authoritarianism of the military government and the democratisation of 1958. These two political shifts resulted from an attempt to respond simultaneously and in an accelerated time frame to land issues, social issues, and Cold War political tensions.

From 1941 to 1948, the social democratic and Communist parties, in contrast to their conservative opponents, gradually positioned themselves in support of the development of the *barrios*. The 1948 coup d'état brought down the Adeco government before the national housing commission's legislative initiatives could be put on the agenda. The new military junta aligned itself with the interests of the real estate and landowning sectors by pursuing a resolutely legalistic policy towards the *barrios*, which were subject to eradication.

In a context of falling oil exports, the interim government of 1958 assembled, in a very short space of time marked by social crisis and electoral reconfiguration, an extralegal policy to install services in the *barrios*. While this new informal urbanization policy was a continuation of that proposed by the Adeco government of 1945–1948, it differed in two crucial respects: the unprecedented scale of informal urbanization and the political benefit that the Marxist parties, derived from it, at the very moment of the Cuban Revolution.

Towards the end of 1958, the Betancourt government realized it needed to recognize the *barrios* and equip them with services if it wanted to stand any chance of success in the upcoming elections against the revolutionary parties. Yet they also had to safeguard land rights in order to prevent economic elites from supporting a scenario similar to that of 1948. The

[114] The Junta Comunal of the working-class parish of El Valle issued 51 such documents relating to *barrios* housing during the first six months of 1975. Nikken, Pérez Perdomo, *op. cit.*, 56.

[115] *Ibidem,* 38.

"official informal order" was thus institutionalized. It became a form of compromise, an improvised, urbanistic third way that helped to consolidate democratization. The Social Democratic councillors' support for the irregular occupation of urban land and the challenge of preserving Venezuela's fragile democratization contrasts with the Chilean situation of 1957 analysed in this volume by Emanuel Gianotti[116] and explains why in Caracas, unlike in Santiago, the "tomas" were not the tools of choice to challenge the regime and the existing legal order.

The debate around regularization thus disappeared even as the *barrios* expanded to a mass scale. It was not until 1974, when the country was enjoying renewed prosperity thanks to a new oil boom, that the Venezuelan authorities tried to revive the plan for a legal management of the *barrios*, this time by putting them in order through both service installation and eventual legal regularization.[117]

[116] Emanuel Gianotti's chapter.

[117] With decree no. 332, the president of the Republic established a "programme to put in order the areas occupied by the poor districts of the country's cities." (*Programa para el ordenamiento de las areas ocupadas por los barrios pobres de las ciudades del pais*). République du Venezuela, Presidencia de la República, *Gaceta Oficial* N°30.472 del 13-08-1974.