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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Public Opinion and Modernity in Venezuela's Anti-Corruption Trials, 1945–8

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Abstract
This article explores the reasons why the most important anti-corruption campaign in twentieth-century Venezuela failed to win sustained support. Employing a constructivist approach to historical actors' understandings of corruption, it analyses the debates that erupted when the Acción Democrática (Democratic Action, AD) party prosecuted 167 former officials for illicit enrichment. The ensuing debate demonstrates that AD and its opponents disagreed over the proper boundaries between the public and private spheres in a modern state. AD sought to punish officials who used public office for private gain, but critiques of the trials effectively countered AD and contributed to its overthrow in 1948.

Keywords: Venezuela; corruption; politics; 1908–48; modernity

For two hours on the evening of 7 February 1946, Venezuelans listened to the radio as the Jury of Civil and Administrative Responsibility broadcast its sentence in the corruption trial of General Vincencio Pérez Soto, a prominent member of the regime of Juan Vicente Gómez (1908–35) who also served briefly in the administration of President Eleazar López Contreras (1935–41). The leaders of the Acción Democrática (Democratic Action, AD) party who dominated Venezuela's provisional government following the October 1945 coup against President Isaías Medina Angarita (1941–5) had established the Jury as an *ad hoc* tribunal to try 167 officials from the regimes of Cipriano Castro (1899–1908), Gómez, López Contreras, and Medina. AD leaders hoped the trials would fulfil their pledge to end corruption, which Venezuelans across the political spectrum agreed was a long-standing national problem. Pérez Soto's case absorbed public attention because he was rumoured to have accumulated a vast fortune, far beyond his salary as the governor of various states, and because many believed he personified the violent abuses of the Gómez regime. The Jury did not disappoint. It declared that Pérez Soto had misused his official positions to amass a fortune of almost Bs. (*bolívares*) 14 million (US$ 4.2 million in 1946), much of which he had attempted to hide from

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investigators, and which would now be confiscated. The people filling the courtroom greeted the verdict with enthusiastic applause, some embracing the Jury members in gratitude.[1] For weeks thereafter, the anti-corruption trials continued to enjoy broad support.

Nevertheless, by April 1946 an influential segment of public opinion, reflected especially in the moderate-to-conservative press, had swung forcefully against the trials as many who originally endorsed the proceedings declared their opposition. Despite AD's eventual reversal of dozens of the Jury's convictions, the trials became emblematic of the party's alleged inability to administer justice impartially and contributed to the coup that removed AD from power in November 1948.[2] What accounts for this change in public attitudes? Why would Venezuelans supportive of ending corruption decide to oppose the most significant effort to prosecute it in the nation's history? Previous explanations focus on problems with the Jury's organisation and procedures, such as its improvised and inconsistent standards of evidence, its hurried proceedings, the lack of time and information available to defendants as they organised their defence, and the failure to prosecute friends of AD whose actions appeared identical to those of some of the convicted.[3] These factors, however, provide at best a partial understanding. The problem with these explanations is that Venezuelans knew of these factors when they gave the Jury their support in early 1946: the list of those to be tried was finalised before the Jury handed down its first sentences in January of that year, many of AD's moderate-to-conservative future critics initially agreed that rooting out corruption required a suspension of existing laws and the formation of an *ad hoc* tribunal, and since Pérez Soto was one of the first convicted his defence was necessarily one of the most hurried.

A deeper understanding of the shift in public opinion requires an examination of Venezuelans' different attitudes concerning the proper division between public and private spheres under the modern state that AD sought to create. Three controversies arising from the trials focused on the contested boundaries between public and private spheres. First, Adecos (members of the AD) justified the trials as a necessary step in replacing Venezuela's personalist, or patrimonial, political system with a modern state that prohibited the use of public office for private profit.[4] As the trials progressed, however, a substantial segment of the middle and upper classes concluded that the Jury went too far in labelling the patrimonial practices of the past as corrupt. Simply put, supporters and opponents of the trials disagreed over how strictly the Jury should police the division between 'public' and 'private'

[1]Dawson to Secretary of State, 9 Feb. 1946, United States National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland, Department of State (hereafter USNARA/DS), file 831.00/2-946, and enclosed press clippings.

[2]Gehard Cartay Ramírez, *Caldera y Betancourt, constructores de la democracia* (Caracas: Ediciones Centauro, 1987), p. 102.

[3]Examples include Carlos Alarico Gómez, *El origen del estado democrático en Venezuela (1941–1948)* (Caracas: Biblioteca de Autores y Temas Tachirenses, 2004), pp. 175–9; Rodolfo Luzardo, *Notas histórico-económicas, 1928–1963* (Caracas: Editorial Sucre, 1963), pp. 158–9; and José Alberto Olivar, 'El Jurado de Responsabilidad Civil y Administrativa, 1946: Caso Román Cárdenas. Los excesos de una revolución', in Christoph Rosenmuller and Stephan Ruderer (eds.), *Dávidas, dones y dineros: Aportes a una nueva historia de la corrupción en América Latina* (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2016), pp. 233–46.

[4]For discussion of these concepts, see Robin Theobald, *Corruption, Development and Underdevelopment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), pp. 19–45.

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in rulers' discretionary use of state funds. Second, a number of prosecutions led to what critics claimed were improper intrusions into the private realm of defendants' families, violating a boundary widely viewed as sacrosanct. Finally, as opponents of the trials constructed a counter-narrative to contest AD's account of the trials' modernising impact, they argued that the Jury's intrusions into the private sphere occurred because Adecos allowed their private emotions of hatred for their political opponents to displace the rational, dispassionate administration of justice that should prevail in a modern state, resulting in the persecution of honourable individuals. This opposition narrative convinced many, well before the trials ended in July 1946, that AD leaders lacked the necessary temperament to police the boundary between the public and private domains. AD continued to defend the trials as necessary for the modernisation of the state but lost the battle for public opinion among an influential sector of society. Thus my central thesis is that the most important anti-corruption effort in twentieth-century Venezuela failed because AD and its opponents disagreed over the proper boundaries between public and private spheres in a modern polity.

Defining Corruption

While many studies of corruption posit a universally applicable definition of the phenomenon and attempt to identify either its root causes or effective strategies to combat it, the analysis presented here adopts a different approach. I follow those scholars who explore what historical actors themselves understood corruption to be, how they acted on the meanings they created, and what developments ensued from their debates. Scholars have labelled this constructivist approach as anthropological, neo-classical, post-positivist or post-modern; it is unified by the assumption that, in any geographical setting or time period, the 'concept of corruption is heavily contested and socially constructed'.[5] For example, there is no universal boundary between acceptable forms of patronage and unacceptable corruption. Thus scholars working in this vein (the present author included) treat corruption as the use of public resources for private benefit in ways that are condemned by public opinion, which may or may not be reflected in legislation. As political scientist Michael Johnston notes in his influential discussion, public debates over the meaning of corruption often reflect underlying disagreements over the demarcation of public and private spheres, or the proper relationship between the state and society. He encourages scholars to examine how 'political contention helps mould and change the meaning of "corruption"' and notes that 'it is an irony of corruption that where it is most important it can also be most difficult to define'.[6] This emic approach is apposite for Venezuela during the *trienio* of AD government (1945–8), when no

[5]Gjalt de Graaf, Pieter Wagenaar and Michel Hoenderboom, 'Constructing Corruption', in Gjalt de Graaf, Patrick von Maravic and Pieter Wagenaar (eds.), *The Good Cause: Theoretical Perspectives on Corruption* (Farmington Hills, MI: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2010), p. 100. The authors of this article summarise the methodologies they discuss as 'social constructivism' (p. 99); for the sake of simplicity, I will refer to the constructivist approach. For a discussion of the various labels attached to this constructivist approach see *ibid.*, pp. 98–9.

[6]Michael Johnston, 'The Search for Definitions: The Vitality of Politics and the Issue of Corruption', *International Social Science Journal*, 149 (1996), pp. 322, 333.

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consensus regarding the meaning of corruption, or how to punish it, emerged from the debate that contributed to the overthrow of AD's democratic experiment. Instead, the controversy demonstrated Venezuelans' divided attitudes regarding how a modern state should define and enforce the proper boundaries between public and private domains.

Venezuelan attitudes towards corruption during the *trienio* reflected concepts that had circulated in Latin America and in the Western world more broadly for over two centuries. In Europe and its colonies before about 1800, corruption was understood primarily as a decline in virtue or, as Bruce Buchan and Lisa Hill write in their recent work, as a 'degeneration of the moral and political character of individuals, corporations, governments or states'.[7] Nevertheless, as they argue, this concept of 'degenerative corruption' has always coexisted with the more specific idea of 'public office corruption', which emphasises 'the misuse of office for private (typically pecuniary) gain'.[8] During the nineteenth century this public office conceptualisation, emphasising actions rather than character, became increasingly dominant in Western societies as part of the broader demarcation of public and private spheres, but the alternative definition of corruption as an issue of character never disappeared completely.

Venezuelan ideas of corruption followed a similar pattern of evolution from the colonial era through to the nineteenth century. The public office ideal was enshrined in law after independence but in the realm of practice and popular opinion it coexisted with notions that emphasised personal character and reputation.[9] As they organised and later defended the trials, AD's middle-class leaders emphasised the public office conception of corruption, insisted on the state's obligation to recover stolen funds, and presented the trials as crucial to political modernity. Opponents of the trials, by contrast, often echoed the older, character-based notion of corruption as they emphasised the virtuous nature of many of those whose property was confiscated by AD. Issues of character and the public–private divide became central to these controversies as opponents defended the morality of patrimonial administration and also argued that AD violated the sphere of the family by confiscating property belonging to virtuous heirs or relatives of former officials convicted of corruption. The success of this opposition narrative suggests that Venezuelans' belief in the sanctity of the family and the justice of paternalist government became intertwined with the notion of corruption as an issue of character, undermining AD's effort to implant the public office definition of corruption as fundamental to a modern state.

This constructivist approach to the history of corruption is only now beginning to be employed by historians of Latin America, as Christoph Rosenmuller and

[7]Bruce Buchan and Lisa Hill, *An Intellectual History of Corruption* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 6.

[8]*Ibid.*

[9]Rogelio Pérez Perdomo, 'Corruption and Political Crisis', in Louis W. Goodman, Johanna Mendelson Forman, Moisés Naím and Joseph Tulchin (eds.), *Lessons of the Venezuelan Experience* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, 1995), pp. 312–13; and Reuben Zahler, *Ambitious Rebels: Remaking Honor, Law and Liberalism in Venezuela, 1780–1850* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2013), pp. 66, 70–1, 108.

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Stephan Ruderer argue in their recent review of the literature;[10] this is true especially of historians working on Latin America during the post-colonial period. Although significant publications have appeared on the modern history of corruption in Latin America, including works by Alfonso Quiroz and Stephen Niblo, their discussion of *anti-corruption* efforts are relatively brief and do not take advantage of the insights offered by the constructivist approach pioneered by Johnston and others cited above.[11] Quiroz's *Corrupt Circles*, perhaps the most notable history of corruption by a Latin Americanist, presents a magisterial account of patterns of malfeasance and their damage to economic development in Peru. His treatment of anti-corruption efforts such as the trials of 1930–1, however, confines itself to legal, institutional and political issues,[12] an approach also adopted by Niblo. The analysis presented here, by exploring historical actors' divergent perspectives on the concepts encompassed by 'corruption', such as the proper boundary between public and private spheres, offers an analysis of the rhetorical controversies that engulfed a major anti-corruption effort.

Like many studies that seek to reconstruct past attitudes regarding 'corruption', this one draws upon sources that provide more insight into some sectors of society than others. Editorials and opinion columns in national newspapers, my principal source of information, often stated that 'public opinion' supported or opposed particular aspects of AD's anti-corruption campaign; writers of these pieces claimed to reflect public sentiment and also sought to shape it. But in a society with an adult literacy rate of only 44 per cent in 1946 and a stark divide between the affluent and the poor, writers of these pieces most likely had a view of 'public opinion' that favoured the perspectives of their middle- and upper-class peers.[13] Nevertheless, the two non-AD newspapers that published editorials and opinion columns most consistently during the period from late 1945 to the conclusion of the trials in July 1946, *El Universal* and *La Esfera*, were undeniably influential. With a daily run of 35,000 copies, *El Universal* had the largest circulation of any Venezuelan newspaper in 1946.[14] Its editorial line was moderately conservative; a leading scholar of the history of Venezuelan journalism considers *El Universal* to have been 'the most balanced' national newspaper in its coverage of *trienio* political campaigns.[15] Although *La Esfera* had a smaller circulation, estimated at 5,000 copies, its editorials – usually written by Ramón David León, an independent conservative – were so widely read that British diplomats believed the paper 'contributed to the downfall of

[10]Christoph Rosenmuller and Stephan Ruderer, 'Introducción', in Rosenmuller and Ruderer (eds.), *Dávidas, dones y dineros*, pp. 11–12.

[11]Alfonso Quiroz, *Corrupt Circles: A History of Unbound Graft in Peru* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); Stephen Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s: Modernity, Politics and Corruption* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1999), pp. 253–309.

[12]Quiroz, *Corrupt Circles*, pp. 238–42.

[13]Judith Brito Cornieles and Hermina Cancela Cambon, 'Desarrollo de la prensa diaria regional (1946–1986)', in Eleazar Díaz Rangel (ed.), *40 años de comunicación social en Venezuela* (Caracas: Congreso de la República, 1988), p. 76.

[14]*Ibid*., p. 78. *La Esfera* and *El Universal* provided the closest coverage and most frequent commentary on the trials of any of the national newspapers other than AD's *El País*, which adhered to the party line.

[15]Eleazar Díaz Rangel, *La prensa venezolana en el siglo XX* (Caracas: Fundación Neumann, 1994), p. 81.

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the Medina regime'.[16] Foreign diplomats who wrote reports on 'public opinion' moved in social circles similar to those of the newspaper editors and opinion writers, though they probably interacted with AD leaders more often.

In sum, as these sources document the shift in attitudes towards the trials, from support to opposition, they reflect the perspective of primarily middle- and upper-class Venezuelans with moderate-to-conservative political views. These sectors' initial support for the trials suggests that they agreed with AD's assertion that the modernisation of the state required an end to corruption. But this common affirmation of an abstract ideal began to crumble once the trials commenced and prominent individuals and families suffered the consequences. Increasingly visceral debates over which past actions should be deemed 'corrupt' and who should be punished led many in the middle and upper classes to withdraw their support for AD's anti-corruption campaign, weakening the government – perhaps decisively.

From Andean Hegemony to the Beginning of the Trials, 1899–1946

The officials tried by the Jury all held office during the period of 'Andean hegemony' when, from 1899 to 1945, military leaders from the western state of Táchira controlled the national government.[17] An understanding of the politics of the corruption trials requires a brief examination of this period, which marked the eclipse of regional caudillos and the formation of an effective national state in Venezuela. Following his seizure of power in 1899, Castro initiated the professionalisation of the national military, and his defeat of the subsequent caudillo revolt in 1901–3 signalled a power shift in favour of the central state. But more dramatic advances in state centralisation, along with more systematic corruption, occurred under Gómez, who seized power from his former ally in 1908 and ruled until his death in 1935.

Gómez's success as an autocratic state-maker derived largely from his ability to employ patrimonial practices to promote the internal cohesion of the regime while modernising segments of the state, especially the Army and the Treasury. He accelerated the military professionalisation begun by Castro, and by the end of 1913 the Army could defeat any caudillo uprising.[18] Treasury Minister Román Cárdenas (1913–22) oversaw fiscal reforms which increased domestic revenues, allowed the regime to weather the Great War's disruption of trade, and financed highway construction and arms purchases until the oil boom of the mid-1920s boosted government resources.[19] Meanwhile, Gómez ensured his collaborators' loyalty by promoting their enrichment through various strategies later scrutinised by the Jury. He awarded petroleum concessions to his allies who then sold them to foreign oil companies, sometimes for huge profits. In addition, Gómez made substantial payments of public funds – usually drawn from Chapter 7 of the budget of the

[16]'Report on Leading Personalities in Venezuela 1946.' Enclosed with Ogilvie-Forbes to Bevin, 26 June 1946, National Archives of Great Britain, Kew (hereafter NAGB), FO 371/52227, File AS-3946/47.

[17]Carlos Siso, *Castro y Gómez: Importancia de la hegemonía andina* (Caracas: Editorial Arte, 1985).

[18]Angel Ziems, *El gomecismo y la formación del ejército nacional* (Caracas: Ateneo de Caracas, 1979).

[19]Miriam Kornblith and Luken Quintana, 'Gestión fiscal y centralización del poder político en los gobiernos de Cipriano Castro y Juan Vicente Gómez', *Politeia*, 10 (1981), pp. 143–238.

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Ministry of Interior Relations – to selected regime officials and a multitude of private citizens who sought his favour.

Gómez and his allies also engaged in more predatory forms of corruption as they used their political power to operate various rackets designed to extract resources directly from the Venezuelan people. The two most important forms of predatory corruption were a national cattle monopoly directed by Gómez, in which he and other top officials appropriated land and livestock to control the domestic market for beef, and state-level liquor monopolies that relied on tax-farming contracts issued to Gómez's allies until 1931.[20] Gomecistas also extorted money from the families of political prisoners, monopolised local food markets, and appropriated coffee groves established by squatters on public lands. Venezuelans experienced a thorough intertwining of political control and economic exploitation, leading to the widely shared sentiment, 'We [Venezuelans] are all just tenants on Gómez's big farm.'[21]

In the transition that followed the dictator's death in December 1935, President López Contreras responded – albeit only partially – to demands for an end to the abuses of the Gómez system. A national wave of violent protests, many directed at the properties of profiteering officials, erupted as López assumed the presidency, and compelled him to shut down the regime's predatory rackets. In a further concession to public sentiment, López's government ordered the confiscation of Gómez's property due to the dictator's use of public resources to build his fortune. Many Venezuelans saw López as one of the most honest Gomecistas, and his avoidance of involvement in Gómez's economic abuses or bloody repression lifted hopes that he would establish a democratic state. López only partially fulfilled these hopes. He allowed more open political debate, brought prominent anti-Gomecistas into his government while marginalising the most hated figures of the old regime, and stepped aside after one presidential term. Nevertheless, López engaged in periodic repression and restricted voting rights to a small minority of the male population. Medina, his hand-picked successor, expanded civil liberties (though not voting rights) and legalised the Venezuelan Communist Party, which profoundly alienated conservatives. His 1943 oil law ended the state's practice of awarding petroleum concessions to private individuals in favour of concessions made directly to companies.[22] Significantly, however, both López and Medina made payments to government officials and allies from Chapter 7 and other discretionary government accounts.

The Adecos' Narrative of Andean Corruption

From the moment that Rómulo Betancourt and other future leaders of AD stepped on to the national stage, they made corruption a centrepiece of their critique of the Andean regimes. Betancourt and other anti-Gómez student protestors in 1928 called for political freedom but also denounced Gomecista corruption. As student leader Joaquín Gabaldón Márquez succinctly stated, 'For Gómez, to govern is to

[20]Doug Yarrington, 'Cattle, Corruption, and State Formation in Venezuela during the Regime of Juan Vicente Gómez, 1908–1935', *Latin American Research Review*, 39: 1 (2003), pp. 9–33.

[21]Quoted in Cook to Secretary of State, 11 May 1925, USNARA/DS, 831.00/1269.

[22]Bernard Mommer, *Global Oil and the Nation-State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 114.

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rob.'[23] The students' condemnation of corruption attracted support from many in the middle and upper classes. In exile the following year, Betancourt and fellow student Miguel Otero Silva declared the hope that Gómez's 'domestic policy of embezzlement [*peculado*] and monopoly might be replaced with one of honesty and free competition'.[24] In the 1936 manifesto that established Organización Venezolana (Venezuelan Organisation, ORVE), a forerunner of AD, Betancourt and his colleagues called for the creation of 'a modern state' in which 'the personalist state of Gómez and his clientele' would be replaced by one 'that offers justice, protection and efficiency to all Venezuelans'.[25]

During the decade between Gómez's death and the 1945 coup, specific denunciations of corruption increasingly focused on payments to government officials and supporters from Chapter 7 of the budget of the Ministry of Interior Relations. These payments became the symbol of patrimonial financial administration attacked by the anti-corruption crusaders. Public controversy over Chapter 7 first erupted in 1936 as prosecutors brought charges against Pedro Manuel Arcaya, Gómez's Minister of Interior (1914–17, 1925–9), for making unjustified payments to numerous beneficiaries. Arcaya responded that the payments were actually legitimate expenditures such as pensions for former government officials and their families who had fallen on hard times, assistance to a multitude of Venezuelans who appealed to the President for aid, salaries for jobs that were not foreseen in the normal budgeting process, payments to thwart anti-government conspiracies, and other justifiable outlays.[26] Arcaya even defended Gómez's use of Chapter 7 for gifts of cash or jewellery when he served as a godfather at weddings or baptisms, or as a sponsor of religious festivities, insisting that such generosity was expected of the President, who was 'seen as a providing Father [*Padre providente*] in the psychology of the people'.[27] He reiterated that Venezuelan law authorised expenditures from Chapter 7 purely at the President's discretion.

The controversy settled nothing. López and Medina continued to budget funds for Chapter 7 (supposedly under more restrictive criteria) and critics continued to lambast the practice of discretionary payments. Speaking in Caracas at the founding of AD in 1941, Betancourt declared that in order to 'moralise and sanitise administrative practice' it was imperative that 'Chapter 7 should pass to the category of a frightening dream, an unpleasant recollection in the popular memory.'[28] In August

[23]Joaquín Gabaldón Márquez to Laureano Vallenilla Lanz, 6 Nov. 1928, in Gabaldón Márquez, *Memoria y cuento de la generación del 28* (Caracas: n.p., 1958), p. 198.

[24]Rómulo Betancourt and Miguel Otero Silva, 'En las huellas de la pezuña' [1929], in Arturo Sosa A. and Eloi Lengrand, *Del garibaldismo estudiantil a la izquierda criolla* (Caracas: Ediciones Centauro, 1981), p. 324.

[25]'Manifiesto-programa del Movimiento de Organización Venezolana (ORVE, 1936)', in Naudy Suárez Figueroa (ed.), *Programas políticos venezolanos de la primera mitad del siglo XX* (Caracas: Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, 1977), vol. 1, p. 142.

[26]Pedro Manuel Arcaya, *Defensa del Doctor Pedro Manuel Arcaya* (Caracas: Tipografía del Comercio, 1939), pp. 96–9; *Cuenta que el Doctor Pedro Manuel Aracaya rinde al pueblo venezolano de los fondos del Capítulo VII*, 2 vols. (Caracas: Impresores Unidos, 1941), vol. 1, pp. xix–lv.

[27]Pedro Manuel Arcaya, *La pena de la confiscación general de bienes en Venezuela* (Caracas: Impresores Unidos, 1945), p. 146.

[28]Rómulo Betancourt, 'Discurso de Rómulo Betancourt' [13 Sept. 1941], in José Agustín Catalá (ed.), *Acción Democrática, primeros años: Oposición y poder, 1941–1948* (Caracas: Centauro, 1987), p. 116.

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1945, just two months before the coup that would bring AD to power, Betancourt made a similar denunciation in the party's newspaper, *El País*: 'It is not a secret to anyone in our country that the famous Chapter 7 lives on in the budget of the Ministry of Interior Relations, a source of *prebendas* [perquisites] and sinecures for the political protégés, family members and friends of those in government.'[29] The rhetorical crusade against Andean corruption had become central to AD's mission and to Betancourt's political identity.

The coup of 18 October 1945 had diverse causes, but the desire to bring Venezuela closer to democratic, developmentalist ideals of modernity provided a connecting thread. The young military officers who led the overthrow of Medina saw themselves as more professional and technically skilled than the older generation of officers who still controlled the armed forces. They also objected to the 'peculation' of Medina's government.[30] As the upcoming presidential campaign came down to a contest between Medina's hand-picked candidate and López Contreras, the favourite of conservatives disillusioned with Medina, young officers decided a coup was necessary to modernise the military and the nation. They invited AD, which had no hope of winning the elections under the restrictive voting laws, to join a coup and lead the new government. Following Medina's overthrow, the officers installed Betancourt as president of the Revolutionary Junta that would govern until elections could be held under a new constitution. Betancourt's cabinet included military officers and political independents, but Adecos dominated.[31] The Junta's first communiqué announced that leading members of the Andean governments would be tried for corruption.[32]

The Junta framed its determination to hold corruption trials as part of its broader effort to replace Venezuela's personalist, corrupt, patrimonial state with a modern, legal, democratic regime. 'The basic goal of our movement', Betancourt announced on 30 October, 'is to liquidate, once and for all, the vices of administration, the embezzlement [*peculado*] and the system of personalist and autocratic imposition … that were characteristic of the governments of López Contreras and Medina Angarita'. The decision to put past officials on trial, Betancourt emphasised, was not motivated by 'subaltern hatred and rancour' directed at AD's long-time opponents. 'This is not a government for retaliation and vengeance', he insisted, 'but for impersonal and stringent justice'.[33] Thus Betancourt (like many previous revolutionaries) staked his government's legitimacy to its ability to dispense rational, enlightened justice.[34]

[29]Quoted in Blas Bruni Celli, 'Rómulo Betancourt frente a la corrupción administrativa', in *Betancourt en la historia de Venezuela del siglo XX* (Caracas: Centauro, 1980), p. 312.

[30]Corrigan to Secretary of State, 26 Oct. 1945, USNARA/DS, Box 5379, 831.00/10-2645.

[31]John Martz, *Acción Democrática: Evolution of a Modern Political Party in Venezuela* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), p. 63.

[32]Robert Alexander, *Rómulo Betancourt and the Transformation of Venezuela* (London: Transaction Books, 1982), p. 218.

[33]Rómulo Betancourt, 'La razón y propósito de la Revolución de Octubre', in Naudy Suárez Figueroa (ed.), *Rómulo Betancourt: Selección de escritos políticos, 1929–1981* (Caracas: Fundación Rómulo Betancourt, 2006), p. 186.

[34]Arno Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 126–7.

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The decrees establishing a framework for the trials reflected a public office concept of corruption while also granting the Jury broad powers. On 22 October, the Revolutionary Junta decreed the formation of a commission that, within two weeks, would specify the individuals whose assets would be frozen pending trials for 'their responsibility in managing public funds, or improper enrichment through abuses in the exercise of State positions'.[35] The decree that established the Jury in late November granted it the power to confiscate the property of any officials it convicted in order to recover public assets that had been lost through the officials' improper 'acts or deeds'.[36] Furthermore, as had been anticipated for weeks, the Junta decided that defendants in the trials would bear the burden of proof to demonstrate the licit origin of their property. Finally, the Junta empowered the Jury to reach verdicts based on its 'faithful understanding and knowledge' of each case, rather than on any law.[37] The Revolutionary Junta chose this *ad hoc* organisation in order to circumvent laws established by the Andean regimes to protect their officials, such as a ten-year limit on prosecutions for financial malfeasance and constitutional provisions dating from the Gómez era that granted officials generous authority to confiscate private property without due process, a provision that could shield predatory officials in ordinary legal proceedings. The public avidly followed these steps to hold former officials accountable. As one newspaper observed, 'in the press, in the street, and in many public hallways, everything related to embezzlement [of public funds] is being discussed and debated with great interest and zeal'.[38]

The anti-corruption crusade received broad support from the moment AD announced its intention to prosecute former officials through the first trials in February and March 1946. *El Universal* published an opinion by legal scholar Humberto Cuenca in late October endorsing the idea of an *ad hoc* process as necessary to circumvent laws that prohibited prosecution for corrupt acts more than ten years in the past.[39] Shortly thereafter, the more conservative *La Esfera* published a column that labelled corruption 'the bloodiest scourge that has lashed Venezuela', voiced strong support for the Junta, and predicted that the upcoming trials 'will be the first time in this country that a true penalty is imposed' for illicit enrichment.[40] Most importantly, the *ad hoc* framework of the trials received a strong endorsement from Rafael Caldera, the leader of Venezuela's Social Catholics and a respected legal authority. Caldera agreed to serve in the revolutionary government as Attorney General (Procurador General) and endorsed the plan to empower the tribunal to act outside existing laws. He explicitly supported the need to reverse the usual burden of proof and to prosecute actions more than ten years in the past, adding: 'No

[35]Junta Revolucionario del Gobierno, 'Decreto No. 6', in Jurado de Responsabilidad Civil y Administrativa (hereafter JRCA), *Sentencias*, 5 vols. (Caracas: Imprenta Nacional, 1946), vol. 1, p. 3.

[36]Junta Revolucionario del Gobierno, 'Decreto No. 64', in *ibid*., p. 19.

[37]*Ibid*., p. 20.

[38]Federico Lesamann Vera, 'La Contraloría General de la Nación y el peculado', *El Universal*, 11 Nov. 1945, p. 4.

[39]Humberto Cuenca, 'La prescripción en el delito de peculado', *El Universal*, 27 Oct. 1945, p. 4.

[40]Alfredo Silva Heredia, 'Contra el arraigado vicio del peculado', *La Esfera*, 30 Oct. 1945, in *Gobierno y época de la Junta Revolucionario (opinión política a través de la prensa, 1945–1948)*, vol. 19 (Caracas: Congreso de la República, 1989), p. 316.

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one can dispute the necessity of punishing corrupt acts.'[41] Other political moderates or conservatives likewise accepted government appointments after the *ad hoc* framework for the trials was announced, suggesting that they too found it acceptable.[42]

During these months between the October coup and the beginning of the trials in January 1946, public scrutiny came to rest on the payments received by government officials from Chapter 7 of the budget of the Ministry of Interior Relations. AD leaders searched government files for evidence to support their assertions that illicit payments had been routine under the Andean regimes. US ambassador Francis Corrigan reported that Betancourt, newly installed in the presidential palace, found slips of paper in Medina's desk authorising payments from the 'President's secret funds' to certain military officers, including Medina's nephew, and that Betancourt immediately concluded they were evidence of corruption.[43] Soon thereafter, Betancourt announced the abolition of Chapter 7 and similar discretionary accounts, describing them as 'drains through which many millions of *bolívares* flowed into the private patrimony of friends and beneficiaries [*usufructuarios*] of the regime'.[44]

Once it became clear that numerous recipients of Chapter 7 would be prosecuted, however, the press voiced concern. One objection, echoing Arcaya's earlier defence, argued that many payments from Chapter 7 were for legitimate expenses, including pensions to former officials and their surviving dependants. In the absence of a formal system of government pensions and social welfare, financial support from the state seemed justified, even if the selection of recipients was entirely at the President's discretion.[45] The revolutionary government responded adroitly to these concerns, acknowledging the justice of some payments while moving ahead with the prosecution of other recipients, a strategy that preserved support for the trials in the press.[46] *El Universal* published an editorial praising the government's more nuanced appraisal of Chapter 7 payments[47] and a week later printed a column claiming 'unanimous backing' for the Junta's battle against corruption.[48]

A second question hanging over the prosecution of some Chapter 7 recipients proved more troublesome for AD. When the government signalled its intention to prosecute Arcaya for his role in managing Chapter 7 under Gómez, Arcaya's son published an open letter stating that some prominent Adecos, including novelist Rómulo Gallegos and poet Andrés Eloy Blanco, had received payments from Chapter 7 and yet were not charged.[49] Political insiders already suspected that some leading Adecos were beneficiaries, and that the government's decision not to

[41]'La necesidad de castigar el peculado es indiscutible declara el Procurador General Rafael Caldera', *El País*, 6 Nov. 1945, in *ibid.*, pp. 129–30; and Cartay Ramírez, *Caldera y Betancourt*, pp. 100–1.

[42]Corrigan to Secretary of State, 3 Nov. 1945, USNARA/DS, Box 5379, 831.00/11-345.

[43]Corrigan to Secretary of State, 30 Oct. 1945, USNARA/DS, Box 5379, 831.00/10-3045.

[44]Quoted in Bruni Celli, 'Rómulo Betancourt', p. 316.

[45]'Por los fueros de la moral administrativa', *El Universal*, 27 Oct. 1945, p. 4.

[46]'Plausible actitud del MRI [Ministro de Relaciones Interiores] sobre listas del Capítulo Séptimo para la publicidad', *El Universal*, 11 Nov. 1945, pp. 1, 8.

[47]'Plausible precaución moral del Ministro de Interior', *El Universal*, 12 Nov. 1945, p. 4.

[48]Luis Ramón Hernández, 'Lucha contra el peculado', *El Universal*, 19 Nov. 1945, p. 20.

[49]Corrigan to Secretary of State, 19 Nov. 1945, USNARA/DS, Box 5379, 831.00/11-1945.

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publish lists of Chapter 7 recipients might have been intended to shield prominent Adecos.[50]

Blanco responded effectively to Arcaya's accusations, but in the process found himself obliged to publicise intimate details of his family life, thus illustrating the intrusive potential of allegations of corruption. Widely revered as one of Venezuela's greatest poets and enjoying a personal reputation for magnanimity and aversion to sectarian politics, Blanco was well positioned to defend AD's anti-corruption campaign. He penned a series of articles in *El Universal* denying that he had received payments from Chapter 7.[51] Blanco stated that he had received salaries for government jobs under López and Medina, and that his mother had received a pension from Chapter 7 after his father died and she confronted economic hardship, including the humiliating sale of the family home. His denial of any personal benefit from Chapter 7 deflected accusations against AD for selective prosecutions, but also demonstrated that defending oneself against accusations of corruption could expose the private domain of the family to the public gaze.

Blanco's predicament was far from unique. By mid-November, the staff assisting the Jury had received 724 letters from individuals presenting justifications for their incomes from Chapter 7. Investigators then visited the homes of many beneficiaries to verify their status as needy recipients of public subsidies.[52] The investigation of corruption thus required physical as well as rhetorical intrusions into the intimate realm of family life even before the trials began.

From Support to Opposition: Three Turning Points

The trials commenced in an atmosphere of intense public interest and continued widespread support, despite a palpable undercurrent of apprehension regarding their ultimate course and impact. The first group of verdicts announced by the Jury, on 3 January 1946, included two acquittals and three convictions, and the public eagerly followed subsequent decisions, including the live broadcast of the verdicts in Pérez Soto's case and other high-profile proceedings.[53] Nevertheless, moderates and conservatives who had offered support to the revolutionary government voiced concerns about the trials in private; these reservations would soon make their way into the press and contribute to the eventual backlash against AD by many in the middle and upper classes. Juan Zárraga Tellería, who had denounced corruption in the Ministry of Development while serving under López, told US embassy officials that he viewed the trials as an unfortunate example of 'demagoguery' that 'harken[ed] back to the Tribunals of Public Safety of the French Revolution'.[54] Zárraga also confided to US officials that the prosecutions were necessarily selective because 90 per cent of former public employees could

[50]Corrigan to Secretary of State, 13 Nov. 1945, USNARA/DS, Box 5379, 831.00/11-1345.

[51]Andrés Eloy Blanco, 'Carta abierta a un llanero', *El Universal*, 29 Nov. 1945, p. 4; 'Cuentas claras', *El Universal*, 30 Nov. 1945, p. 4.

[52]'La Comisión que conoce de [causa de] pensiones del Capítulo VII rendirá informe al respeto', *El Universal*, 15 Nov. 1945, p. 1.

[53]'Radiodifusora Nacional transmitirá los pormenores de otros juicios por peculado', *La Esfera*, 16 Feb. 1946, p. 14.

[54]Corrigan to Secretary of State, 14 Nov. 1945, USNARA/DS, Box 5379, 831.00/11-1445.

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be implicated in corruption and it was impossible to try them all. Gumersindo Torres, who served as Minister of Development under Gómez but had an unblemished reputation for administrative honesty, recorded similar reservations in his diary (including his own reference to 'the tribunals of the French Revolution'), adding that AD's battle to end corruption should focus on creating a clean bureaucracy in the present rather than prosecuting past sins.[55] In mid-February, the Spanish legation in Caracas reported to Madrid that support for the government was eroding among economic elites because the Jury acted with 'a rigour [they] considered to be too great'.[56] J. R. de Gortazar, the Spanish Encargado de Negocios (Business Attaché), noted that 'one of the most criticised points' of the trials was the Jury's decision to prosecute officials for using Chapter 7 funds to fulfil godparent obligations at 'a great number of weddings and baptisms, paying their expenses, and providing aid during the illness and misfortune of many countrymen traditionally dependent on the "secret" [*reservada*] charity of the government'. Although Gortazar had no sympathy for the beneficiaries of Chapter 7, referring to them as 'parasites' on the state, he observed little support for the prosecution of officials responsible for these payments. Whereas AD's promise to modernise the state and end personalism had initially elicited broad support, important segments of the public now suspected that some prosecutions (especially those related to Chapter 7) reflected an imprudent decision to label the patrimonial practices of the past as corrupt.

In late February, *El Universal* and *La Esfera* began to publish reservations about specific aspects of the trials; significantly, however, they framed these criticisms in a context of continued support for the government and the goals of the Jury. An editorial in *El Universal* began by stating that 'there is no reason to doubt the support that the majority of Venezuelans grant to the mission, as difficult as it is delicate, to recover' public funds that had been appropriated through illicit actions.[57] Nevertheless, the editors also made the crucial claim that 'public opinion' strongly questioned the government's decision to confiscate property belonging to the heirs or associates of allegedly corrupt officials. Prosecutions of this sort, they argued, appeared to be driven by 'the desire for revenge and persecution'. Signalling its agreement, *La Esfera* promptly published an editorial saying that the editors at *El Universal* had articulated the sentiments 'that today pulsate in the national soul'.[58] The editors of *La Esfera* concurred that confiscations of property currently owned by the heirs of deceased, allegedly corrupt officials were probably motivated by the Adecos' desire for 'revenge'. According to *La Esfera*,

[55]Gumersindo Torres, *Memorias de Gumersindo Torres, un funcionario incorruptible en la dictadura del General Gómez*, ed. José Agustín Catalá (Caracas: Presidencia de la República, 1996), pp. 198–9, 203, 221; quotation, p. 199.

[56]Gortazar to Ministro de Asuntos Exteriores, 15 Feb. 1946. Archivo General de la Administración, Alcalá de Henares, Spain, Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores (hereafter AGA/MAE), Box 82/05345, File R. 1754-13, Venezuela, Política.

[57]'Las Tareas del Jurado de Responsabilidad Civil y Administrativa', *El Universal*, 21 Feb. 1946, p. 4.

[58]'La revolución de octubre no cobra rencores, su honrada propósito es que se haga justicia', *La Esfera*, 23 Feb. 1946, pp. 1, 15.

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> No one should use the same rod to measure the person who took advantage of his office or influence to enrich himself at the expense of the community's misery, and the person who, through a legitimate process of succession, received an inheritance of which he has made decorous and honest use.[59]

Such arguments reflected the belief that there ought to be limits on the state's right to recover embezzled public funds, and that it should not impose hardship on the respectable spouses or children of corrupt officials who inherited corrupt wealth through no fault of their own.

The issue of unwarranted government intrusions into the private realm of honourable families gained particular notoriety in the stories of three defendants: Caracas Country Club President Baldomero Uzcátegui, former President López Contreras, and Arturo Uslar Pietri, a prominent civilian in Medina's government. The cases against these defendants all involved funds from Chapter 7 and thus highlighted the different perceptions of these grants, ranging from Adecos' belief that they were blatantly illicit to former officials' view that they represented legitimate public expenditures. Criticisms of these three prosecutions coalesced into an increasingly coherent narrative claiming that the government's intrusion into the private realm of the family was driven by Adecos' private passions of hatred, a failing which disqualified them as modern state-makers. As these cases unfolded, AD found itself ever more on the defensive.

On 20 March 1946, Baldomero Uzcátegui committed suicide while his case was pending before the Jury. A member of the Caracas elite with long-standing ties to the Gómez family, Uzcátegui was popular among the upper classes, having been 'recently reelected President of the Country Club of Caracas', as Ambassador Corrigan explained to Washington.[60] Uzcátegui had gained prominence in the 1920s as a businessman and associate of José Vicente Gómez, the dictator's son. He had accumulated holdings in cattle and agriculture while also administering José Vicente's gambling monopolies and serving as an intermediary for his acquisition of oil concessions. When, following the student protests of 1928, Gómez sent José Vicente into exile, Uzcátegui was ordered to accompany him. José Vicente died in 1930, but Uzcátegui remained close to his widow, Josefina Revenga, and served as her financial advisor. Uzcátegui felt responsible for having counselled her to keep much of her fortune in Venezuela, which exposed her to larger losses now that she too was on trial before the Jury. But apparently the chief reason Uzcátegui took his own life was that he had been questioned 'rather roughly'[61] by the Jury and believed he would be convicted of receiving Bs. 76,440 in illicit payments through Chapter 7.

The narrative circulating through Caracas society held that Uzcátegui, a virtuous patriarch, killed himself to guard his family's honour and that he had been driven to this fate by his unjustified persecution by the Jury. Corrigan, reporting the news that had spread immediately among the capital's well-to-do, wrote that Uzcátegui 'left a note to his adolescent son' stating that 'My name is not and cannot be

[59] *Ibid*, p. 15.
[60] Corrigan to Secretary of State, 21 March 1946, USNARA/DS, 831.00/3-2146.
[61] *Ibid.*

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stained.'[62] *El Universal* articulated the indignation felt by many in elite circles. Praising Uzcátegui as 'a man completely dedicated to work and entirely devoted to raising a family full of virtue',[63] the article all but accused the government of causing his demise.

> The circumstances in which Señor Uzcátegui's death occurred are truly lamentable, because they are a product of the present situation in which many compatriots suffer intense and unnecessary persecution … It is not possible, in the case of Señor Uzcátegui, to silence the motives that led to his death because they are patent in all our [social] sectors and constitute, without any doubt, clear proof that a climate of harmony among all Venezuelans … cannot be achieved through means that are governed by violence and hatred.[64]

Uzcátegui's funeral, according to the Spanish legation, turned into an 'extraordinary demonstration that … was interpreted as a vindication of his honour [*honorabilidad*] and a patent critique of the Government's handling of the question of peculation'.[65] Opponents of the trials could now point to a martyr.

Uzcátegui's lawyers contributed to this narrative by arguing that he had been psychologically depressed by the Jury's charges. Reinforcing the trope of the honourable patriarch, they insisted that Uzcátegui was not tormented by the threat of financial losses if convicted. Rather,

> [i]t was the horror of seeing himself defamed, it was the pain of a moral penalty to which he had been subjected, that unbalanced his nerves and brought him to the tragic resolution that deprives his family of their strongest support and deprives the Fatherland … of a useful man and exemplary citizen.[66]

Uzcátegui had received his first payment from Chapter 7 (Bs. 1,440) to cover legitimate relocation expenses when, in 1923, he served as a Venezuelan consul in Germany. He received a second payment in early 1928, after Juan Vicente Gómez was named the patron of the annual celebration of Our Lady of Candelaria in the village of Turmero (located between Caracas and Gómez's residence in Maracay) and ordered that Bs. 25,000 be paid from Chapter 7 as his contribution to the festivities. This sum was issued to Uzcátegui in his capacity as head of the celebration's organising committee; he spent the funds appropriately and derived no personal profit. Uzcátegui received the third payment of Bs. 50,000 in exchange for a field of sugar cane he had to abandon when Gómez sent him into exile in 1928. His lawyers emphasised that this constituted justifiable compensation and that Uzcátegui had no alternative but to accept it as he hurriedly complied with Gómez's order to leave Venezuela. In late June 1946, the Jury quietly

[62] *Ibid.*

[63] 'Lamentable desaparición', *El Universal*, 21 March 1946, p. 1.

[64] *Ibid.*, p. 2.

[65] Gortazar to Ministro de Asuntos Exteriores, 1 April 1946, AGA/MAE, Box 82/05345, File R. 1754-13, Venezuela, Política.

[66] 'Defensa del Señor Baldomero Uzcátegui: Sus relaciones con el Capítulo VII', *El Universal*, 1 April 1946, p. 16.

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acquitted Uzcátegui, accepting his lawyers' explanations but making no mention of the toll its accusations had taken on Uzcátegui and his family.[67]

Similarly, the prosecution of former President López Contreras also caused many to question AD's impartiality and its intrusions into the private realm. The decision to try López for corruption came as a surprise to many. Corrigan, who had served in Venezuela since 1939, noted shortly after the coup that 'even his worst enemies have rarely brought charges of dishonesty' against the former President.[68] Many Venezuelans – including some of Gómez's most fervent opponents – also gave López credit for curtailing the most predatory forms of corruption following the dictator's death.[69] Military officers who had served under López and admired his integrity were likewise taken aback by the decision to try him in absentia for corruption.[70]

Even before the trails began, concerns over the treatment of López were amplified by an affront committed against his wife, María Teresa Núñez de López Contreras, who was also the sister of Juan Vicente Gómez's most prominent mistress, Dolores Amelia Núñez.[71] As María Teresa and her daughters boarded their flight to join López in exile in December 1945, authorities confiscated her jewellery, perhaps acting on the knowledge that Chapter 7 funds had been used to purchase jewellery for Gomecistas' relatives and friends. Many saw this treatment of a former first lady as an inexcusable insult; she fanned this outrage in two public letters to *La Esfera* complaining that the authorities at the airport had treated her and her daughters 'like vulgar smugglers', failed to respect 'my condition as a woman' and inflicted 'moral damage' on her family.[72] López's attorney told Ambassador Corrigan that incidents like 'the discourteous treatment of Sra. de López Contreras (i.e., the seizure of her personal jewellery at the airport as she was leaving Venezuela)' threatened to provoke a counter-coup.[73] Betancourt clearly sensed the episode's negative repercussions. Years later he still remembered the Minister of Interior Relations arriving at the presidential office with a package that 'contained the drop earrings and other jewellery seized at the Maiquetía airport from the wife of General López Contreras. I reacted with indignation: "Why has this outrage been committed? Get this away from me!" I hurled some very Venezuelan curses.'[74]

López argued that the incident demonstrated that Adecos' desire for revenge, rather than impartial justice, motivated the prosecution. In a public response to his conviction in April 1946 (the month following Uzcátegui's suicide), López noted that political opponents in Venezuela usually refrained from attacking

[67]JRCA, *Sentencias*, vol. 4, pp. 84–90.

[68]Corrigan to Secretary of State, 26 Oct. 1945, USNARA/DS, Box 5379, 831.00/10-2645.

[69]For one example, see Rufino Blanco Fombona, 'El gran presidente que nos deja', *La Esfera*, 16 April 1941, reprinted in Eleazar López Contreras, *El triunfo de la verdad: Documentos para la historia venezolana* (Mexico City: Genio Latino, 1949), pp. 258–9.

[70]Santiago Ochoa Briceño, *Lo que vi, oí e hice. Del andinismo a la democracia. Memorias* (Caracas: Ediciones de la Presidencia de la República, 1994), p. 247.

[71]Keeling to Simon, 24 Aug. 1934, NAGB, FO 371/17618, file A7420.

[72]Reprinted in Rodolfo José Cárdenas, *COPEI en el trienio populista, 1945–1948* (Madrid: Hijos de E. Minuesa, 1987), p. 410.

[73]Corrigan to Secretary of State, 14 Dec. 1945, Box 5379, USNARA/DS, 831.00/12-1445.

[74]Rómulo Betancourt, *El 18 de octubre de 1945: Génesis y realizaciones de una revolución democrática* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1979), p. 343.

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each other's wives but, he charged, the government's 'thirst for vengeance' had led it to ignore 'the traditional respect' for women.[75] Thus López neatly reinforced the narrative of an irrationally vengeful Jury intruding into the private realm of the patriarchal family.

The Jury's verdict contained many accusations concerning López's interactions with family members and intimate associates.[76] It ordered López to repay the nation over Bs. 13 million in public funds that he had either received himself or funnelled to his family. The Jury found that López had received Bs. 100,000 from Chapter 7 authorised by Gómez; according to one former official, this was the dictator's wedding gift to López.[77] But most of the suspicious expenditures came from discretionary accounts under López's authority during his presidency, with records indicating that they went to López, his wife's secretary, his mother, and various officials. The Jury noted that López and his inner circle did not always keep these funds, but found it unacceptable that they often spent the money on jewellery and other gifts to those who named the President a godparent at baptisms and weddings. López, like many of those prosecuted for expenditures from Chapter 7, responded that he could not return money or goods that he had never kept, and that dispensing patronage – either personally or through intermediaries – was a necessary function of government. In his public letter,[78] López shrewdly argued that his distribution of these funds was crucial to maintaining public order during the post-Gómez transition, an achievement for which he was still admired. 'Everyone in Venezuela knows', he wrote,

> that thousands of people filed through Miraflores [the presidential palace] to solicit resources to attend to urgent necessities: the purchase of medicines, medical treatment, money for students, pensions for widows, orphans, invalids, the extremely poor, etc., etc., and that there they received monetary assistance when their situation justified it. These are widely known facts. I would have provoked inflamed protests if I had withheld the protection of the State from so many indigent people.

Corrigan suggested that López's defence presented an accurate description of 'the very loose and paternal administration of public affairs' that prevailed before the 1945 coup.[79]

The press refrained from explicit denunciations of the verdict against López, but editors at *La Esfera* certainly had it – and the Uzcátegui tragedy – in mind when they wrote an editorial arguing that the public now had grave reservations about the trials. The editors began by recalling the initial, widespread support for the trials, noting that 'collective opinion, at first unanimously, applauded the measures undertaken to exterminate peculation'.[80] But now, according to the editors, 'elements not considered guilty by [public] opinion have been brought before the

[75]'Remitido', *El Universal*, 28 April 1946, p. 5.
[76]JRCA, *Sentencias*, vol. 1, pp. 303–34.
[77]Siso, *Castro y Gómez*, p. 363.
[78]'Remitido'.
[79]Corrigan to Secretary of State, 19 March 1946, USNARA/DS, 831.00/3-1946.
[80]'El peculado, vieja tara nacional', *La Esfera*, 25 April 1946, p. 1.

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extraordinary judges'. They concluded that 'political rancour [and] sectarian influences' determined some of the Jury's verdicts and thus 'detracted from the mission of justice'. Three days later *El Universal* published López's letter (quoted above) charging that the Jury was driven by the desire for revenge rather than impartial justice. Shortly thereafter, events surrounding the case of another defendant, Arturo Uslar Pietri, reinforced this critique yet again.

Uslar, a childhood friend of Gómez's family and holder of various government positions since 1929, culminating in several key posts under Medina, penned one of the most devastating polemics of twentieth-century Venezuelan politics in response to his conviction.[81] The Jury found Uslar responsible for Bs. 1,157,200 in mishandled funds from Chapter 7 and similar accounts.[82] Uslar, who was exiled with other top officials, could not organise a defence during his trial from his new residence in New York. But in late March he wrote an open letter to Betancourt in which he justified his handling of public funds, criticised the Jury, and scornfully dismissed Betancourt's fitness for government. Uslar's letter became the most widely-read argument that Adecos' unbridled emotions drove them to violate the proper boundary between the public and private realms and revealed their inability to govern rationally and justly.

Uslar charged that the Jury, through a combination of partisan malice and ignorance of the workings of government, had misrepresented his handling of funds. The payments he received from Chapter 7 between 1929 and 1933 were not 'unjustifiable', as the tribunal alleged; rather, these were Uslar's salary and travel expenses related to his appointment as Attaché at the Venezuelan legation in France. Uslar also declared that he had used his largest payments from Chapter 7 while he served as Medina's personal secretary, to provide pensions and assistance to deserving individuals, payments which Uslar defended as 'inherent in the paternalistic character of our Governments'.[83] Although he appeared in financial records as the recipient of these funds, Uslar – like many who disputed the Jury's verdicts – claimed that he was merely an intermediary and that to allege 'that I may have unduly appropriated these funds is mere nonsense'.

Uslar held Betancourt responsible for the actions of the Jury, claiming that the tribunal 'is nothing other than the grotesque guillotine of your revolution'. The Adeco leader had also unjustly harmed the patrician's family: 'Drunk with gratuitous hatred and rancour', wrote Uslar, 'you have forcibly taken from me the legitimate patrimony of my children, though my conscience and honour remain unscathed'. He found it furthermore intolerable that the Jury had confiscated property belonging to his wife and that it insinuated the pension paid to his father, General Arturo Uslar, was illegitimate. In a clear reference to Uzcátegui, Uslar charged that the trials had driven 'useful and good men to suicide'. He blamed Betancourt for all these injustices because 'you created that Tribunal of Responsibility to satiate your political hatred'. Uslar denigrated Betancourt as 'nothing other than a demagogue' who, lacking the education and temperament

[81]Rafael Arráiz Lucca, *Arturo Uslar Pietri* (Caracas: El Nacional, 2006).

[82]JRCA, *Sentencias*, vol. 1, pp. 287–302.

[83]Uslar Pietri to Betancourt, 26 March 1946 (printed broadsheet), enclosed with Uslar to Braden, 25 April 1946, USNARA/DS, 831.00/4-2546.

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necessary for responsible political leadership, had 'fabricated the false image of a cultivated man'. Secure in his own status as an internationally recognised intellectual, Uslar rendered a condescending verdict on Betancourt's qualifications to establish a modern state: 'You are not even familiar with the general outline of the great juridical and social monument of administrative science.'

Betancourt's government bungled its response and – in some observers' eyes – confirmed Uslar's accusations of excessive partisanship and ineptitude. Police detained the editor of the moderate *El Heraldo* following its publication of Uslar's letter and contacted editors of other papers to advise them not to publish it. The conservative *La Esfera* nevertheless printed the letter the next day; when police moved to detain its editor, he went into hiding. Meanwhile, the police detained Alfredo Boulton, a leading businessman and Uslar's kinsman, for distributing copies of the letter. Following a predictable uproar against censorship, Betancourt ordered the release of the detained men and cancelled the order to arrest the editor of *La Esfera*, but also warned against further expressions of 'virulent disrespect' toward the government.[84] The press responded harshly. An editorial in *La Esfera* criticised the government's overreaction to Uslar by citing the aphorism: 'it is worse than a crime, because it is an act of foolishness'.[85] *El Universal* published a column by Manuel Vicente Tinoco that echoed the tone of Uslar's letter in dismissing Adecos' qualifications to govern. Tinoco disdainfully advised Adeco leaders: 'Perhaps through reading and close contact with our public men who are seasoned in the delicate experience of command, you could acquire, over time, a better sense of the responsibility of Government.'[86] On the political Left, Miguel Otero Silva, an independent communist, novelist and humourist who participated in the anti-Gómez protests of 1928 with Betancourt before establishing *El Nacional*, noted satirically that the government had inadvertently accomplished the feat that 'there does not remain a single Venezuelan who has not read Uslar Pietri's letter'.[87] Corrigan reported that the government's response to the now famous letter 'has served to alienate, at least temporarily, much of the press and many political independents who have been friendly or open-minded toward it'.[88]

Consolidation and Triumph of the Opposition Narrative

During the final months before the conclusion of the trials in July 1946, defendants and their supporters filled the press with accusations against the Jury that continued to weave together the themes of destructive Adeco emotions and violations of the private sphere, especially the family; this opposition narrative became the basis for arguments that the government should review and overturn some of the Jury's verdicts. Tadeo Guevara Rojas, the attorney for General José María García, a kinsman of Gómez who served the dictator as a state president and cabinet minister, argued in *El Universal* that the Jury's conviction of García was driven by the desire

[84]Corrigan to Secretary of State, 10 May 1946, USNARA/DS, 831.00/5-1046.

[85]'Por la libertad de la prensa', *La Esfera*, 7 May 1946, p. 1.

[86]Manuel Vicente Tinoco, 'Al Presidente de la Junta Revolucionario de Gobierno', *El Universal*, 8 May 1946, p. 4.

[87]Martín Fierro [pseudonym of Otero Silva], 'La carta', *El Nacional*, 9 May 1946, p. 4.

[88]Corrigan to Secretary of State, 10 May 1946, USNARA/DS, 831.00/5-1046.

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for 'political and perhaps personal revenge'. This persecution, according to Guevara, had resulted in the unjust confiscation of property that belonged to García's wife and children, along with all García's assets in Venezuela.[89] Similarly, Eleazar Morrison charged that the Jury 'assaults my wife', Virginia Febres Cordero de Morrison, by confiscating her property even though only Morrison himself was convicted.[90] The Jury's action, wrote Morrison, 'is not Justice, it is political vengeance … This is one of the greatest crimes committed against PRIVATE PROPERTY.'[91] Several articles also criticised the Jury's confiscation of property belonging to Antonio and Ramón Pimentel, the sons and heirs of Antonio Pimentel (senior), a close friend and business partner of Gómez who had died in 1938 and was despised by the dictator's opponents. *La Esfera* published an article charging that the Jury was motivated by 'political resentment' and criticising its treatment of the Pimentel brothers as 'unjust' and 'arbitrary'. According to the article, 'the fact that the deceased Antonio Pimentel was a friend, *compadre* [godfather to one of Gómez's sons], and loyal follower of Gómez does not constitute guilt on the part of his descendants, nor even less a reason to ruin them'.[92] Because the Pimentel brothers had successful careers in business and never held political office, the Jury was allegedly confiscating wealth they had created along with what they had received as inheritance. Accusations that the Jury violated the property rights of the relatives of those convicted of corruption added to the argument that AD could not impartially administer the division between public and private spheres. Legal scholar Manuel Octavio Romero Sánchez concluded that 'the Jury is an instrument of hatred and vengeance that prostitutes Justice', leading to violations of property rights and of universally recognised human rights.[93]

As the Jury issued its final verdicts, editors at *La Esfera* and *El Universal* offered critical assessments of the Adecos' anti-corruption campaign. An 18 July editorial in *La Esfera* argued that 'all honest Venezuelans' applauded the punishment of those who had used their official positions to enrich themselves but that the Jury had also committed 'excesses, acts of vengeance, or injustices'.[94] According to the editors, 'Honest families have been reduced to poverty for no other fault than that of having legitimate ties of family and of friendship with former officials.' Thus the editors suggested that the Jury should have given greater consideration to the moral quality or reputation of the heirs than to the origin of their family fortunes. A similar editorial the next day in *El Universal* praised the government's intention to ensure the proper use of public funds but also echoed the criticisms made by *La Esfera*, including the Jury's confiscation of property belonging to the

[89]Tadeo Guevara Rojas, 'Remitido. En relación con la defensa del General José María García', *El Universal*, 12 June 1946, p. 5.

[90]Eleazar Morrison, 'Remitido No. 4. Eleazar Morrison y la sentencia del Jurado de Responsabilidad Civil y Administrativa', *La Esfera*, 27 May 1946, p. 3.

[91]Eleazar Morrison, 'Remitido No. 7', *El Universal*, 4 June 1946, p. 3.

[92]'Sentencias del Jurado de Responsabilidad Civil y Administrativa', *La Esfera*, 16 July 1946, pp. 16, 14.

[93]Manuel Octavio Romero Sánchez, 'Estudio jurídico de la situación política de Venezuela desde del 18 de octubre de 1945', *La Esfera*, 20 June 1946, in *Gobierno y época de la Junta*, vol. 20, p. 301.

[94]'Los procesos por peculado', *La Esfera*, 18 July 1946, p. 1.

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heirs of corrupt individuals.[95] *El Universal*'s editors opined that such 'unjust' acts resulted from the Jury's 'hatred'. They noted that the trials had produced 'nine months of anxiety' and provoked a 'great commotion' among social and economic leaders. 'In our view', they concluded, 'it is the government's duty … to look for a corrective, a review [of the verdicts]' in order to restore 'strict justice and the most objective fairness'.

The divergent views of AD and its conservative critics regarding both the definition of corruption and the appropriate measures to punish it were now evident. Adhering to the public office concept of corruption, AD advocated that all those who mishandled public funds for their private benefit should be held accountable, and that these funds should be recovered for the nation. By contrast, conservative editors and commentators believed the anti-corruption drive should be conditioned and even limited by other considerations – the sanctity of the family, the trials' impact on social harmony and stability, and public opinion (which AD's critics often equated with elite opinion) regarding the corrupt or virtuous character of defendants. The July editorial in *La Esfera* even claimed that the Jury's work should be guided by 'the finger of [public] opinion' which would indicate those who should be punished.[96] Indeed, *La Esfera*'s editors had argued as early as February 1946 that the Jury should not convict respectable heirs who made 'decorous and honest' use of their inherited wealth or living officials deemed to be honourable. Rather, they asserted, the Jury should be guided by '[t]he accusing finger of the collective conscience … [which] has identified without vacillation the individuals onto whom the full weight of the law should fall'.[97] Thus the editors' assessment of the Jury echoed a view of government prominent in the colonial and early national eras, in which Venezuelans judged the legitimacy of state action by its success in balancing considerations of social stability, morality, public opinion and the rule of law.[98]

Criticism of the Jury had become so widespread that even Betancourt, always zealous in the fight against corruption, recognised the need to repair the political damage inflicted by the trials. On 19 July 1946, the same day that *El Universal* published the editorial cited above, the US embassy learned from Betancourt that his government was considering the possibility of a review of the sentences, largely because of fears that the confiscations might provoke a counter-revolution led by López.[99] However, a substantial segment of the party opposed any review of the convictions.[100] Domingo Alberto Rangel, an Adeco intellectual, vigorously defended the Jury's work as a necessary part of Venezuela's transition from 'the personalism of the caudillo' to a 'liberal state' with a 'modern constitutional

[95]'Los Juicios por Responsabilidad Civil y Administrativa', *El Universal*, 19 July 1946, p. 4.

[96]'Los procesos por peculado'.

[97]'La revolución de octubre no cobra rencores', pp. 1, 15.

[98]Zahler, *Ambitious Rebels*, pp. 63–5.

[99]Corrigan to Secretary of State, 19 July 1946, 831.00/7-1946, in US Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1946*, vol. 9 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1969), p. 1303.

[100]Corrigan to Secretary of State, 3 April 1947, USNARA/DS, Box 5381, 831.00/4-347; and Maleady to Secretary of State, 18 July 1947, USNARA/DS, Box 5381, 831.00/7-1847.

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organisation'.[101] Revolutions, he observed in AD's *El País*, had to destroy the existing order before creating a new one, and the confiscations ordered by the Jury were needed to break the financial power of AD's hard-line opponents. Perhaps the decisive factor within governing circles, though, was that Defence Minister Carlos Delgado Chalbaud, a leader of the 1945 coup who presumably spoke for others in the military, favoured a review of the Jury's findings.[102] In October 1947 the government decreed that a commission drawn from the elected, AD-dominated national constituent assembly would review the convictions and sentences of any defendants who submitted a formal request. The Commission completed its work in early 1948.[103]

The Commission received 117 petitions for the restitution of confiscated property from those found guilty of corruption, and from their relatives and heirs. In the end, 13 petitions resulted in the return of all confiscated property and 36 resulted in the return of a portion of the confiscated property.[104] Sixty-eight petitions were rejected. Some of the most high-profile defendants, including Uslar and former Presidents Medina and López, did not request reviews of their convictions because they believed it would imply their acceptance of the legitimacy of the government and its procedures.

The Commission did not specify the principles that guided their review; nevertheless, some patterns emerge from their decisions. The Commission proved more sympathetic to petitions seeking to reverse confiscations for financial corruption related to Chapter 7 than for predatory corruption (officials' abusive extraction of resources directly from the public). Thus former state governors and liquor tax farmers who, in the opinion of the Jury, had participated in the predatory, monopolistic practices of the Gómez era – such as José María García, José Antonio Baldó, Ramón H. Ramos, and Ovidio Márquez Méndez – saw their petitions rejected. By contrast, almost all of the 13 whose confiscated property was completely returned had been convicted by the Jury for misuse of funds from Chapter 7 or similar discretionary accounts. These defendants held that they had received the funds for legitimate expenditures, without deriving personal profit. The Commission apparently found these explanations more convincing than the Jury had, although it rejected other petitions to overturn convictions related to Chapter 7. Finally, the Commission returned property to heirs of deceased officials and to relatives of convicted living officials (such as the wife of Eleazar Morrison) who claimed that they were the true owners of property the Jury mistook as belonging to defendants. In some cases, the Commission returned property to the heirs of officials convicted of involvement in predatory rackets, including relatives and heirs of Pimentel and even Gómez. In these instances, commissioners' sensitivity to charges that Adecos had unjustly punished relatives of their political enemies apparently trumped their antipathy towards Gomecistas' predatory practices.

[101]Domingo Alberto Rangel, 'El derecho revolucionario y los juicios por peculado', *El País*, 5 Feb. 1947, p. 4.

[102]Corrigan to Secretary of State, 18 Nov. 1946, USNARA/DS, Box 3581. 831.00/11-1846.

[103]'Ayer tarde recibió la Comisión Permanente de la ANC el informe elaborado por la comisión [que] revisó los juicios por peculado', *La Esfera*, 31 Jan. 1948, p. 3.

[104]'Comisión de ANC conoció informe sobre los juicios de peculado', *El País*, 2 Feb. 1948, pp. 1, 2; 'Devueltos los bienes de 23 enjuiciados por peculado', *El Nacional*, 31 Aug. 1948, p. 20.

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AD leaders believed their willingness to review and overturn some verdicts proved their concern for justice and lack of partisan hatred. But the reversals failed to curb anti-AD sentiment. Newspapers that had turned against the trials called for more convictions to be overturned, claiming again that they were motivated by Adeco hatred;[105] even former officials whose property was returned continued to rail against the government.[106] Unfortunately for AD, criticisms of the trials had become part of a broader critique of the government. Opponents had concluded that AD was overly sectarian, exclusionary and bent on using the power of the state to entrench itself in power. The trials contributed to this narrative, but by the time some verdicts were overturned the critique had broadened to include AD's education policy, apparent favouritism in the distribution of state benefits and jobs, and its treatment of opposition parties and unions.[107] The bitterness created by the trials had become too interwoven with these concerns to be appeased. In November 1948 the AD government was overthrown by many of the same military officers who had placed the party in power three years earlier.

Within weeks of the coup, the military government informed López that his confiscated property would be returned, and in September 1949 it returned all assets seized by the Jury.[108] The most notable response came from Rafael Caldera, the moderately conservative Social Christian leader who had joined Betancourt's government in 1945 and endorsed the organisation of the trials, only to resign the following year in protest against AD's alleged sectarianism, and who in 1947 joined those claiming that the Jury's 'political passion took the place of justice'.[109] Caldera nonetheless lamented the military's decision to overturn all the Jury's convictions because he believed that some defendants had committed corrupt acts. Since the government had not carried out a case-by-case review, he wrote, 'it will never be known which individuals were responsible for public theft … Now the danger is that peculation of public funds will be regarded as a crime without punishment.'[110]

Conclusions

A constructivist approach to the debates over AD's anti-corruption campaign highlights the deep divisions within the Venezuelan middle and upper classes over the meanings associated with 'corruption' in the mid-twentieth century. Debates over the trials were rooted primarily in different understandings of the proper division between public and private spheres rather than disagreements over the organisation of the trials and their procedures. AD's insistence that political modernity required a strict prohibition against the use of public office for private enrichment failed not

[105]'La revisión de los juicios de responsabilidad', *El Universal*, 6 Feb. 1948, p. 4.

[106]Tulio Chiossone, *Memorias de un reaccionario* (Caracas: Congreso de la República, 1988), pp. 225–6; 'La crisis del poder', *El Universal*, 25 Aug. 1948, p. 4.

[107]Luzardo, *Notas histórico-económicas*, p. 158; Judith Ewell, *Venezuela: A Century of Change* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1984), pp. 94–107.

[108]Leddy to Secretary of State, 22 Sept. 1949, USNARA/DS, Box 5383, 831.00/9-2249.

[109]Rafael Caldera, 'Una revolución sin rumbo', *El Gráfico*, 19 June 1947, in *Gobierno y época de la Junta*, vol. 20, p. 22.

[110]Quoted in Leddy to Secretary of State, 22 Sept. 1949, USNARA/DS, Box 5383, 831.00/9-2249.

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only because of the Jury's procedural missteps, but because opponents successfully painted the trials as intruding into the sacrosanct realm of the family and personal honour, and because of the fear of the disorder that could ensue if the patrimonial bond between the state and society were severed. The trials and the debates they engendered, rather than producing a consensus on the meaning of corruption and related issues, served instead to reveal the profound disagreements that lay beneath Venezuelans' apparent agreement on the need to end 'corruption'. As Caldera intimated, this lack of consensus regarding corruption and the lengths to which the state could legitimately go to punish it meant that future governments had an uncertain basis for prosecuting any but the most egregious cases of malfeasance.[111]

The controversy caused by the trials cast a long shadow over later attempts to curb corruption in Venezuela. In 1977, as a flood of petrodollars poured in and new accusations of malfeasance and impunity dominated the media, Betancourt worried that public disgust at corruption could destroy the democratic system he and others had founded after the fall of the military dictatorship in 1958.[112] He proposed that AD join with Caldera's Christian Democrats to organise a vigorous prosecution of corrupt officials regardless of party affiliation. But Caldera and other leaders rebuffed the proposal, citing the reaction against the trials during the *trienio*.[113] Uslar Pietri, now widely respected as an elder statesman and cultural authority, criticised Betancourt's idea and once again bemoaned his treatment by the Jury three decades earlier.[114] Leaders across the political spectrum disregarded Betancourt's proposal. Corruption continued to worsen during the years that followed, contributing powerfully to disenchantment with Venezuela's political system. Hugo Chávez and other leaders of the two unsuccessful coup attempts in 1992 pointed to corruption as a justification for their uprisings. As one scholar of post-1958 corruption has noted, these rebels and many other Venezuelans denounced corruption as both a legal and moral transgression, without distinction.[115]

In recent years, Venezuelan historians have undertaken a reconsideration of the *trienio* from the vantage point of the Chávez era. In contrast to earlier scholars who argued that the Adeco government of 1945–8 failed because of its partisanship and exclusionary policies, these revisionists have praised Adecos' attempt to carry out a democratic revolution within a constitutional framework while respecting civil liberties, an argument often crafted as an implicit critique of perceived Chavista excesses.[116] Such presentism, ironically, runs the risk of overlooking some of the most instructive dynamics at work in the frustrated transition attempted by the

[111]*Ibid.*

[112]Rómulo Betancourt, 'Discurso ante la convención extraordinaria de AD', in Suárez Figueroa (ed.), *Rómulo Betancourt*, p. 437.

[113]Alicia Frielich de Segal (ed.), *La venedemocracia* (Caracas: Monte Avila, 1978), pp. 88–9.

[114]Alfredo Peña, *Conversaciones con Uslar Pietri* (Caracas: Ateneo de Caracas, 1978), pp. 49–53.

[115]Juan Carlos Rey, 'Corruption and Political Illegitimacy in Venezuelan Democracy', in Damarys Canache and Michael R. Kulisheck (eds.), *Reinventing Legitimacy: Democracy and Political Change in Venezuela* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), pp. 114, 128.

[116]Rafael Arráiz Lucca, *El trienio adeco (1945–1948) y las conquistas de la ciudadanía* (Caracas: Editorial Alfa, 2011); Germán Carrera Damas, *Rómulo histórico: La personalidad histórica de Rómulo Betancourt*

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Adecos in 1945–8. If Venezuela's future leaders decide to hold anti-corruption trials, they would do well to proceed with an understanding of how an absence of consensus on issues related to 'corruption' contributed to the end of AD's campaign to achieve a rapid transition to political modernity during the *trienio*.

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Spanish abstract

Este artículo explora las razones que explican por qué la campaña anticorrupción más importante en el siglo XX en Venezuela fracasó en ganar un apoyo sostenido. Utilizando un acercamiento constructivista a la forma en que los actores históricos entienden la corrupción, el artículo analiza los debates que emergieron cuando el partido Acción Democrática (AD) enjuició a 167 antiguos funcionarios por enriquecimiento ilícito. El debate subsecuente demuestra que AD y sus oponentes nunca se pusieron de acuerdo sobre los límites adecuados entre las esferas pública y privada en un Estado moderno. AD buscó castigar a los funcionarios que utilizaron sus cargos públicos para obtener ganancias privadas, pero las críticas a los juicios efectivamente fueron en su contra y contribuyeron a su derrocamiento en 1948.

Spanish keywords: Venezuela; corrupción; política; 1908–48; modernidad

Portuguese abstract

Este artigo explora os motivos pelos quais a campanha de anti-corrupção mais importante da Venezuela no século vinte falhou em obter apoio contínuo. Aplicando uma abordagem construtivista do entendimento da corrupção pelos atores históricos, o artigo analisa os debates que surgiram quando o Partido de Ação Democrática (AD) indiciou 167 ex-funcionários por enriquecimento ilícito. O debate subsequente demonstra que o AD e seus oponentes discordavam sobre os limites entre as esferas pública e privada no Estado moderno. O AD buscou punir funcionários que usaram de seus cargos públicos para ganhos pessoais, mas críticas aos julgamentos se opuseram ao AD e contribuíram para sua derrota em 1948.

Portuguese keywords: Venezuela; corrupção; política; 1908–48; modernidade

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