COLONIALISM AFFECTING OUR WORLD TODAY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE EXECUTIVE OFFICES IN MEXICO AND VENEZUELA

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By
Lindsey Murphy

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: REVISITING POST-COLONIAL THEORY

Despite the fact that some tend to consider Latin America a homogeneous region because of its shared language and history of colonial occupation, in reality it is a diverse region with each country possessing its own historical and contemporary idiosyncrasies. For instance, some states experienced a higher degree of colonization than others during the three centuries of Spanish colonial rule. However, common to all states, the colonizers completely shattered the indigenous governance structures and replaced them with a highly centralized and exclusive administration. After gaining their independence from Spain, the newly formed nations had the task of not only reconstructing their identity, but also their state.

The impact colonialism had on newly independent states after centuries of colonial occupation, while being a polemical issue, is not a new one. Yet it remains a relevant topic, and also deserves more attention today in light of recent political developments in the region. For example, in Mexico in 2000, a candidate of the political party the Partido Acción Nacional became president of the country. This marked the first time the public elected a member of an opposition party to office since the creation of contemporary political parties in Mexico in 1929. Another important development was the presidential election of Hugo Chávez in 1998, which overthrew the political system that had been firmly entrenched in Venezuela since the 1950’s. These instances indicate
that Latin America is still a dynamic, evolving region of the world that deserves further consideration. On the surface, these groundbreaking events in Mexico and Venezuela seemed to indicate that the ramifications of colonization were finally obsolete. However, these events also led me to question whether colonization continued to affect their modern political systems, and if so, in what way and to what extent.

Many of the institutional patterns that can be observed today in the region are consequences of the political identity structure developed during the colonial period. After all, the colonial administration was in place longer than Latin American countries have existed as independent states. For this reason among others, this period has had a strong influence on the political culture of these states after independence. Moreover, the political divisions that appeared after decolonization came directly as a result of the independence movements, and these factions later formed political parties which presently play a significant role in the national politics of these countries. Therefore, the political culture of identity stratification precipitated the use of colonial administrative elements, i.e., strong centralization of power, the lack of judicial and legislative organs with any real power and a rigid social hierarchy topped with the elite and defined by their collective identity, which the post-colonial elites embraced and maintained after independence. This shaped the institutions seen in Mexico and Venezuela today.

It would be presumptuous to simply assert that because a former colony continues to face large obstacles in its development, and that because the social, economic and political conditions are very similar to those that characterized the country under colonialism, that the state has not evolved or made alterations to their political system
since the colonial period. Although the post-colonial world can never be entirely free from its colonial heritage, some states had greater success than others when dealing with the legacies decolonization left behind (“Why I use the term Postcolonial”). This research specifically focuses on the influence colonization and decolonization had on the evolution of the executive branches in two case studies, Mexico and Venezuela.

The Mexican and Venezuelan executive offices have long been characterized as particularly strong and centralized. Since decolonization, the Mexican and Venezuelan presidents have dominated the political agenda by choosing the issues and policies they wanted to pursue. During this time, neither the legislative nor the judiciary branches have had significant success in opposing or impeding the executive agenda. Indeed, the presidents have enjoyed the ability to initiate legislation and have done so quite frequently in pursuit of their parties’ interests. Because of their agenda setting ability, the executive offices have dominated political affairs at the national level. Moreover, the presidents have had the ability to appoint many federal, state and local bureaucratic officials, and have been able to control which interest groups have access to the government by choosing which groups to incorporate and which to exclude.

One extreme example of presidential dominance would be President Chávez’s dismissal of Congress and formation of a Constitutional Assembly in Venezuela which subsequently resulted in the creation of an entirely new national constitution in 1999. A second example would be the president’s ability to handpick the presidential successor from 1929 until 2000 in Mexico, a process that the main political party institutionalized.
For these reasons, I was curious to know what impact, if any, colonization had on the institutionalization of this type of strong, centralized executive.

**Literature Review**

Even though there is a strong consensus among scholars that the colonizers left a distinct mark on the countries they settled in numerous ways, there are varying opinions as to the extent to which this legacy is still significant to these countries today. These debates gave rise to a body of literature that deals with post-colonial theory. In my review of post-colonial theory, I divide the literature into two separate categories that are relevant to my analysis. The first group details the effects of colonialism on collective identity formation, nationalism and social stratification; the second focuses on the concrete institutional consequences of colonialism such as regime type, political party formation and the dynamics of national politics. My study contributes to post-colonial literature in that I further explore the legacies of colonialism, and in doing so, establish a causal relationship between collective identity formation and the institutional outcome the elite realized during post-colonial political development.

The term “post-colonial” refers to the period of time that follows colonization in the history of a country. In essence, “it is the ending of one period and the emerging of another, which can be quite difficult to identify” (Childs and Williams 1997: 1). The chief contributors to this scholarship illuminated distinct aspects of the post-colonial experience that are pertinent to my investigation, mainly the concept of identity. On one hand, theorists claim that the colonizer and the colonized have two disparate identities (Said 1979; Spivak 1988). In *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1979) discusses the concept of
“the others,” and explains that humans attempt to define themselves by identifying what they are not. He focuses on the dichotomy of East versus West, and the fact that the “Western world” has defined itself as being the opposite of the “Eastern world.” For example, Western civilizations see themselves as lacking barbarity, ignorance and a primitive life style, and for this reason, perceive themselves as superior to Eastern ones (Said 1979: 31-5, 53). In the same way, Spivak (1988) recognizes that the Western notion of superiority has the ability to perpetuate the oppression of the developing world. She claims there is a stark contrast between the hegemonic imperial power, the colonial elite and the “inferior,” native population. In her opinion, the two former groups were responsible for containing and silencing the latter (Childs and Williams 1997: 177-8).

On the other hand, a few post-colonial theorists indicated the similarities between the colonizer and the colonized (Fanon 1967; Bhabha 1994). Both Frantz Fanon (1967) and Homi Bhabha (1994) describe a “native identity” in a post-colonial environment. Fanon believed that it was the aspiration of the native to eliminate the colonizer’s position in society so as to rid their land of its oppressive ruler, and to impose their own style of government. Bhabha posits that mimicry was a strategy of the colonial powers in which the colonizer tried to mold the identity of the colonized so that their cultural values began to resemble the colonizers’, while at the same time, both groups still possessed two separate collective identities. Bhabha additionally calls this strategy “exclusion through inclusion” because the colonizers accept the good elements of the natives and denounce the bad ones. This molding of native identity demonstrated that it was possible for the colonizer to effectively change the natives’ perception of themselves according to the
colonizer’s ideals, which fundamentally required both the colonizer and the colonized to find commonalities. Bhabha called this relationship between the colonizer and the colonized “hybridity” because, to some extent, after extensive coexistence between two groups, their cultural values and identities blended together (Childs and Williams 1997: 123-9).

Both Fanon and Said strongly believe that colonization played a role in mobilizing the oppressed, thereby compelling the natives to strive for independence (Gandhi 1998: 122). Simon During (1987) supports this view by maintaining that it was the desire of the formerly colonized communities to develop and achieve a new identity (During 1987: 34). Moreover, Fanon argued that colonization did more than control the native populations; “it distorted, disfigured and destroyed” the history of the people, which subsequently fostered the creation of new identities under colonial regimes (Fanon 1967: 170).

Although a significant portion of post-colonial literature focuses on identity and nationalism, the second group of literature details the varying institutional effects of colonialism on the indigenous population after the departure of the colonizers. Several scholars focus on the cultural aspects of decolonization (Césaire 1955; Wiarda 2005). Amié Césaire (1955) believes that the colonizers’ goal was to “civilize” the indigenous “barbarism”, and when this transpired, they came close to negating indigenous civilizations. Furthermore, she states that the Europeans drained societies, trampled cultures, undermined institutions, confiscated lands and wiped out extraordinary possibilities (Césaire 1955: 40-43).
To compliment her studies, Howard Wiarda (2005) claims that the legacy of colonialism is authoritarianism in all facets of modern Latin American culture: political institutions, religion, family, the education system and in the work place. According to Wiarda, “colonialism brought an unyielding social and political structure based on class and race” (Wiarda 2005: 5-6). He explains that the political institutions were top-down, absolutist and authoritarian; the economic institutions were exploitative and semi-feudal; the social structure was rigid, hierarchical and elitist; the religious institutions reinforced the state system in that they were also hierarchical, closed, absolutist and authoritarian; and the educational system ultimately “retarded” Latin American development (Wiarda 2005: 6). Wiarda attributes the authoritarianism in the past to the political and economic chaos after decolonization. Moreover, he asserts that even though republican and liberal ideas served as partial inspiration for independence, the authoritarian “colonial legacies survived the independence movements” and are “still present in Latin America today” (Wiarda 2005: 6). Wiarda claims these legacies “provide several major ingredients in what might be called a distinctively Latin American model of development” (Wiarda 2005: 6).

Although Wiarda makes important observations about the political patterns in Latin American countries, his research is distinctly different from mine. Wiarda explains how colonization left the authoritarian system intact which subsequently altered the political and economic development in Latin America. He uses these aforementioned characteristics to point out possible reasons for why Latin American countries have not achieved democratic political systems and liberal economic systems. And while Wiarda
recognizes that Latin American countries have particularly strong executive branches, he attributes this executive dominance to the elite’s need for strong leadership in the disorganized, chaotic post-colonial societies. My research differs from and contributes to his in that it deals specifically with the elite collective identity and social hierarchy established during colonization, and how and why this hierarchy was used to create a dominant executive office post-colonization.

A great many scholars correspondingly concentrate their studies on the institutional legacy of colonialism (Huque 1997; Young 1994; Mahoney 2010; Collier 1979). Ahmed Huque maintains that countries under colonial domination “experience a different way of developing,” and that the colonial period affected the current performance of the political institutions. In essence, after independence, political leaders were attracted towards certain political systems because they were “familiar with a type of system, characterized by domination and control” (Huque 1997: 15). In the same way, Crawford Young and James Mahoney assert that recently independent states are misleadingly called “new states” because they exhibit the characteristics of the former colonial regime.

In accordance with the extensive amount of literature in which scholars elaborate on the legacies of colonialism, some scholars suggest that although countries developed and evolved since the colonial period, authoritarian governments are resurging (Collier 1979; Cardoso 1979; Cotler 1979). With their concept of “new authoritarianism”, these scholars describe how authoritarian governments arose once again as a means of resolving internal political tensions. By eliminating opposing political factions and by
creating an underlying pact of domination with key political parties, scholars suggested that these states could provide stability. Guillermo O’Donnell characterized these Latin American countries as “bureaucratic authoritarian” states, which they assert was a common feature of many Latin American political systems, particularly in the 1970’s and 1980’s (Cotler 1979: 255).

In contrast to the idea of a resurgence in authoritarianism, Bernhard, Reenock and Nordstrom suggest that the most recent studies on colonialism show that its legacies might be fading (Bernhard, Reenock, Nordstrom 2004). These studies suggest that certain colonial powers prepared their colonies for democracy better than others, implying that just because a country experienced colonial rule, does not mean that it prevented a country from developing a democratic government. These same studies suggest that in particular cases, the longer period of time spend under colonial rule indicated a positive correlation with successful post-colonial democracy (Bernhard, Reenock, Nordstrom 2004: 226). However, these studies dealt with former dependencies that had contact with a colonial ruler that practiced democracy itself. In the cases of Mexico and Venezuela, along with many others, the colonizers who settled the region emigrated from a country that sustained a monarchical government.

The literature on post-colonialism frames my research in several ways. Through my investigation I aim to supplement the existing post-colonial literature by providing a new perspective on development and the relevance of the post-colonial experience. Previous post-colonial scholars noted the importance of the construction of an independent identity and a new sense of nationalism separate from that of the colonizers.
Yet they do not concretely connect the ways in which this separate identity impacted the construction of the state, and institutionalization of power. Moreover, while previous scholars also present clear connections between colonial and post-colonial institutions and the affect this had on the political culture of Latin American countries, they seem to take this aspect of the post-colonial period for granted. They present the topic as if the independence leaders of the colonized countries had few other options except to impose the same political institutions to which they were subjected; a few even suggest that the “authoritarian government structures were an unintended consequence of the liberal elite” (Negretto and Aguilar-Rivera 2000: 361).

My research centers on and supplements these essential points of post-colonialism in an attempt to explain how colonialism is still affecting our world today. I endeavor to understand the current political situation of Mexico and Venezuela in terms of colonial history, specifically studying the ways in which the elite stratified identities during colonization, and the ways in which this was relevant to institutional development. I contend that the post-colonial elite, continuing to base their social hierarchy on stratified identities, developed centralized executive institutions in order to perpetuate the exclusion of the indigenous, as well as those “others” below them in the social hierarchy.

**Methodology and Cases**

In investigating the political development of Mexico and Venezuela, I use a parallel comparative case study (Skocpol 1980: 176). The main advantage to this type of study is that it will allow me to examine the current behavior of these two different countries with similar histories. Furthermore, I will be able to bring to light an
unexplored aspect of political behavior of these countries through their comparisons; namely, how the formation of a collective identity among the colonial elite prompted the creation of a strict social hierarchy, in turn provoking the development of a strong, centralized executive branch that had the power of keeping the hierarchy intact. Even though this approach can be useful, one drawback is that findings cannot be generalized to other cases. Nonetheless, my findings are important to the study of contemporary situations in these two cases, and are likely to be found to be applicable elsewhere.

In addition to a parallel comparative case study, I use a comparative historical analysis in investigating my cases. This method is useful for tracing the overall development of social forms over time and comparing those developmental processes, such as the affect of colonialism on modern state development (Shin and Hytrek 2002: 462). This method allows a focus on comprehensive structures and large-scale processes that provide strong clues to the pattern of historical occurrences, not only on the group and individual level, but also at the macroscopic level which I will be observing (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003: 7).

I chose the case studies of Mexico and Venezuela for various reasons. In examining the histories of both countries, I identified specific, common characteristics that define them. These characteristics include the mode of colonization, the independence movements that evolved, the type of leaders that assumed control during and after the independence movements, the nature of political factions that appeared as a result of the independence movements, and the key events that define the nature of these contemporary regimes (political party formation, creation of a modern constitution, etc.).
At the same time, the differences in the two cases will be carefully examined as they also provide important insight to the dynamics being studied; it is the contrasts as well as the similarities that make these cases useful in this specific research question.

The colonization of the Americas had a substantial influence on Mexico and Venezuela, and continues to be relevant to what is currently happening in these countries. The countries had separate colonial experiences, and developed their post-colonial state structures independent of one another. Prior to colonization, Mexico had highly advanced indigenous civilizations, and was a vital region to the Spanish during colonization because it was rich with valuable metals. In contrast, Venezuela not only had very basic, indigenous governance organization, but the Spanish were also involved in this region though to a lesser degree. Although Venezuela had fertile land and a convenient coastline for trade, it lacked an abundance of raw metals. During the colonial period, the Spanish administration dislodged Mexico and Venezuela’s indigenous state governance structures, and both countries had strong criollo leaders who led independence movements against Spain.

In spite of their independent histories and political development, one cannot help but notice specific parallels in the histories of these two cases, and in the characteristics of their political institutions. Mexico and Venezuela have federal governments, and the executive offices play a predominant role in the politics of these states. Mexico and Venezuela experienced a little over a century of caudillo rule post-independence, and then developed their individual governments with a strong executive branch that preserved the tradition of corporatism. Not only did this happen in both countries in the
same chronological order, but it also occurred in a relatively similar time frame. It is for these reasons that Mexico and Venezuela provide an interesting case study of the affects colonialism had on the political development of the executive offices.

**Explaining the Impact of Colonization on Executive Evolution**

Some pose that Mexico and Venezuela, at times, have come close to achieving democracy, or that they have taken imperative steps toward becoming more democratic. However, others find that the dominance of the executive branch continues to undermine democratic reform. Regardless of the democratic indicators one identifies, the fact that a centralized and strong executive plays a central role in both countries is irrefutable. The nature of the executive branch in both cases has been a defining and determinant factor in both the system of governance and popular access to the system. I argue that the strong executive branches these countries have today are one of the structural ramifications of the identity politics of colonialism. Specifically, the strong executive can be explained by colonialism via the process by which colonizers displaced and replaced socio-political hierarchies of identity:

1. Colonial displacement of traditional indigenous governance structures with centralized hierarchies led to extremely powerful and dominant executive offices during colonization in both Mexico and Venezuela;

2. The *criollos* (creoles) developed and used a new-found nationalism to bring about the independence movement so they could replace the *peninsulares* (people from mainland Spain) in the political system;
3. This nationalism was partly based on the *criollos*’ constructed collective identity: a dichotomy in which the Spaniards saw themselves as symbolizing enlightenment, reason, truth and modernity, and the indigenous as being savage, pagan, uneducated and primitive;

4. Those who became elite under the colonial social hierarchy and organized the independence movement are directly responsible for perpetuating this executive dominance after decolonization, because it was never in their interest to create an open, inclusive government, and they clung to identity stratification the colonizer created;

5. Colonization played a key role in the development of a new political identity for the *criollos*. After achieving independence, however, this political identity produced major political factions among the nationalist elite of the newly independent state, eventually evolving into the modern political parties we see today.

The relationship between colonial displacement of traditional indigenous government structures and a modern, dominant executive office can be explained in the following manner. Colonialism dismantled the indigenous social hierarchy and supplanted it with one in which the Europeans excluded and marginalized the natives. As a result, post-colonial development was founded on the creation of a dominant executive office with the objective of perpetuating the exclusion of the indigenous, as well as those “others” below them in the social hierarchy.

I am not proposing that it is impossible for a state to overcome its colonial heritage, but rather that both Mexico and Venezuela have vestiges of colonial identity
structures reflected in their political institutions. Furthermore, I suggest that despite the political changes and reforms that may seem democratic to outside observers, both countries maintain political regimes that retain key characteristics first established during the colonial period. Namely, both continue to be characterized by a strong, central executive and the relative marginalization of the indigenous and others assigned “lower” social status.

My analysis proceeds in the following manner. I begin by studying three important time periods in Mexican history: pre-colonial society, colonial society and the modern political developments that have taken place since Mexican independence. I continue by doing the same analysis of Venezuela in which I examine the pre-colonial and colonial societies, in addition to the important political developments since the last caudillo ruler in Venezuela. Next, I explore the parallels between the three major time periods, and the similarities in their governance structures at key points in these two countries’ histories. I will be examining how the colonial social hierarchy based on the elite collective identity contributed to the development of strong executive institutions in both countries. Finally, in applying my theory to these two cases, I will conclude with how colonization affected the political development of these countries in order to demonstrate that the nature of their executive institutions has generally remained the same, therefore explaining why Mexico and Venezuela’s colonial history continues to be germane today.
CHAPTER II
MEXICO

Mexico has experienced a great deal of change in its long political history. Before the Spanish conquest, it was home to many advanced indigenous civilizations. During the colonial era, Spanish institutions dislodged indigenous ones, and when the colonizers departed, the leaders of the independence movement had to repair the economic, social and political aftermath. Political leaders fought civil wars, displaced each other via coups, created national constitutions and founded political parties – all significant, defining moments in the country’s history. Despite the fact that Mexico experienced colonial occupation approximately 200 years ago and has since evolved in all of these ways, the Spanish colonial legacy continues to be reflected in the modern political institutions of the Mexican state.

To understand how colonialism affected the modern executive institutions of Mexico, it is first important to analyze the structure of the pre-colonial societies. Although the level of organization varied among these societies, many developed social hierarchies and some level of political organization. The natives’ contact and coexistence with the colonizers significantly altered the indigenous social hierarchy, as well as the political organization. This chapter will examine these political structures and how the Spanish colonizers imposed their own socio-political institutions in the Americas, effectively eliminating the indigenous ones. It will then examine the colonial-era
institutions and how the aforementioned transformations during colonization led to the creation of a strong executive office which dominates Mexican politics today.

**Pre-Colonial Society**

Before Cristóbal Colón set foot on the shores of America in 1492, complex and developed civilizations existed in what is now Mexico. The earliest people to arrive in the region were nomadic groups of hunter-gatherers, and they did so as early as 8000 BC. These groups settled the land and developed methods of subsistence agriculture, eventually evolving into villages with highly stratified societies. By the time the Spanish arrived and began to conquer the land of the indigenous, these societies had become exceptionally advanced (Kirkwood 2010: 17).

From about 1500 BC to 200 BC the first stratified civilizations appeared in Mexico, including the Olmecs and the Mayans. Although it is unknown which of these was the first civilization in Mexico, it is generally accepted that the Olmecs were the first to establish settlements. The Olmecs had an agricultural society, a lunar calendar, a number system, and were well-known for their colossal sculptures of human heads. The indigenous societies gradually transformed from nomadic to agricultural in nature, and social hierarchies and division of labor materialized (“Mesoamerican Olmec Civilization” 2010).

The Olmecs used slash and burn agriculture, and consequently village settlements were spread far apart, prohibiting the development of cities with large populations. The cities that did exist were religious centers, and religious rituals and sacrifices took place in large pyramids built as temples for religious ceremonies. For the Olmecs, the earliest
political organization evolved out of religious order because the rulers were elite priests who derived their power by divine right. The elite lived in the cities, while the rest of the population lived in agricultural regions that surrounded them. Even though there was an organized religious and political governing class, Olmec society was still fairly decentralized because the main function of these cities was ceremonial rather than political (Kirkwood 2010: 18).

During this time cities began to grow, and a distinct social hierarchy developed and division of labor emerged. The most important urban center in Mesoamerican culture was Teotihuacán, which appeared around 200 BC. Teotihuacán was different from traditional Olmec cities in that not only did various types of people live and work there, but it was also used as a manufacturing and trading center. This multi-ethnic city preserved a strong theocratic tradition and centralized its political power, whereas Olmec cities, rather than serving as political centers, functioned as centers for religious worship. Of all the Pre-Columbian societies, the culture of Teotihuacán exercised the most influence over the Mayan civilization. Even though Teotihuacán did not belong to the Mayan empire, there was a great deal of social and cultural interaction between this urban center and the Mayan empire (Quesada 2001: 29-30).

Scholars considered the Mayans to be the most brilliant of the classic groups and the most advanced scientists of ancient America. They developed their own hieroglyphic writing, observed the stars and planets to create intricate calendars and practiced human sacrifice in religious ceremonies. The Mayans, like the Olmecs, had a decentralized political system; their political centers were spread out across the Mesoamerican region,
and no single center was more important than the rest (Kirkwood 2010: 23). The centers had a social hierarchical structure and agricultural towns surrounded these central cities. Although the empire was decentralized, the Mayans did have a well-established trading route and frequently traded with other important urban centers of the time.

Like many other societies, they had a highly stratified social pyramid. At the very bottom were farmers and slaves who provided society with food and labor. Slaves could be orphans, criminals, prisoners of war or other enemies of the empire. Those of higher social status did not necessarily mistreat slaves, yet the slaves had no privileges, served as a source for almost all manual labor in Mayan society and regularly were victims of human sacrifice. The middle class consisted of artisans, merchants and professionals who were essential for commerce; they provided Mayan society with valuable goods and services. At the very top of the hierarchy were kings, priests and nobles who maintained their high status because they controlled important natural resources, claimed the divine right to govern and passed their power by inheritance (“Mayan Social Classes” 2005).

In the 12\textsuperscript{th} century, the technologically advanced Aztec civilization appeared in the Valley of Mexico. At first, Aztec society was quite simple in its organization, but developed a much more complex social structure after its population began to grow significantly (“The Aztec” 2006). Aztec social hierarchy evolved similarly to the Olmec and Mayan structures. The elite and priests held power at the top of the hierarchy; the middle class was made up of merchants and nobles; and at the bottom were the slaves and macehuales, or commoners. The social hierarchy developed in this way primarily
because familial occupation was passed through heredity; societal divisions were not based on any specific skin color, language or ethnic groups ("Aztec Culture" 2006).

Unique to the Aztec civilization was the fact that slavery was not hereditary; children of slaves were free at the time of their birth. Moreover, Aztec slaves, or *tlacotin*, were distinctly different from war captives due to the fact that the Aztecs could sell themselves as slaves to settle their debts with the empire and it was not a permanent condition, whereas war captives never had the hope of one day earning their freedom. The slaves were responsible for working land and paying tribute to their masters. *Macehuales*, although free in society, were still members of the lowest social class. As a result, they were differentiated from higher social classes economically and hierarchically in that they lived an agrarian life-style working the land rather than holding administrative positions, they were expected to pay tribute to the governing class, and they wore special clothing to denote their lower social status in society ("History of Mexico" 2004).

This society was very aggressive and put emphasis on a strong military, and the military aristocracy was a prominent group in the stratification. Aztec society was comparatively flexible in that the military served as an opportunity for social mobility. Warriors who proved themselves in battle could acquire land and the authority to govern those people on their property. Additionally, because of their aggressive and militaristic society, they conquered a vast amount of territory which later required a huge political system to govern ("The Aztec" 1996).
As a consequence of the Aztec empire’s rapid expansion, the additional provinces provided the elite at the center of the empire with a regular flow of tribute goods. These tributes came in the form of textiles, cacao, maize, beans, honey, salt, chilies or humans for sacrificial rituals. The empire expanded in this manner until it controlled 38 provinces (over 80,000 square miles), making the Aztec domain increasingly environmentally and culturally diverse. Regardless of the vast amount of territory the empire controlled, the individual provinces ultimately answered to Tenochtitlán (“The History of Mexico” 2004).

Despite strong centralization of power in the hands of the elite, local organization was also a significant component of Aztec society. Calpullís, the most basic unit of organization, were groups of families that owned the land communally, with the leaders of the calpullís taking responsibility for the basic needs of the group. The leaders collected taxes from group members in order to collectively pay tribute to the empire. Furthermore, the Aztec empire put a strong emphasis on education; the calpullís were responsible for providing school systems, and enrollment was mandatory for all children (“Aztec Culture” 2006).

Although individual provinces and local organizations evolved, the politics remained centralized. Family members made up the calpullís, and calpullí leaders then served on the city councils which held a great deal of power in the government. Each city council had an executive council within it, and the members chose one person from the council to lead the city, called the tlatcaní. The tlatcaní ruled as an emperor and the citizens worshipped him as a god. The emperors consequently exercised a tremendous
amount of power over the entire empire, and these central rulers in the government forced conquered lands to pay them tribute like those previously described (“Aztec Culture” 2006).

Patterns developed across these pre-colonial civilizations. For instance, earlier societies had similar social hierarchies in that the elite class included the wealthy and religious figures, while the lower classes consisted of slaves and the working class. The elite obtained their positions in society in a variety of ways; those who controlled major resources in the empire, traded luxury goods (merchants), provided valuable services to the empire (soldiers) and religious leaders all became part of the elite class. Factors such as ethnicity, language and skin color did not determine the hierarchy. It was essentially occupation that determined social status, and then heredity kept that social hierarchy in place. Furthermore, pre-colonial societies were generally more flexible, especially the Aztecs.

Even if the indigenous elected their local leaders, at the highest level of the political system the governing class made up a very small percentage of the native population and had the divine authority to govern. Likewise, religion was central to indigenous life, which is demonstrated by the fact that the leaders derived their legitimacy to rule and their power from the gods. In addition, one characteristic of pre-colonial societies was the centralization of power. While this is not characteristic of all the early societies, it is most notably an integral component of Aztec society, and this civilization was a result of the evolution of the numerous societies that came before it. Their people developed strong cultural and political traditions, a scientifically advanced
society and fostered economic interaction with other civilizations. Upon conquering the New World and the Aztecs, the foreign explorers discovered a socially stratified, highly militaristic, politically centralized and an intensely religious civilization.

**Colonial Society**

Starting in the 15th century and continuing into the 17th, Europeans were obsessed with exploring the world around them to discover more efficient trade routes to the Indies. As a consequence of this maritime exploration, a European explorer by the name of Cristóbal Colón unwittingly initiated the colonization of the Americas in 1492 when he touched land on what is today the Bahamas. Later in 1519, Hernán Cortés arrived in the Valley of Mexico; it wasn’t until 1521 that his troops overcame the Aztec empire and began colonizing this specific region (“The Spanish Conquest” 1996).

Those explorers found that the region contained vast amounts of uncultivated land and other desirable resources. In order to maintain control over the indigenous population and the resources of the New World, the Spanish Crown erected institutions to govern them. These new institutions were quite different from those they replaced in that different factors determined the colonial hierarchy than did the indigenous one, and, importantly, marginalized the social classes that had topped the indigenous hierarchy. This displacement of indigenous institutions was significant in that it was no longer the indigenous who governed their land; the Spanish were responsible for choosing who could hold power based on their own set of contrived standards (Quesada 2001: 87).

The territory in the Americas was broken down into four major viceroyalties: New Spain, Peru, New Granada and Río de la Plata. Mexico belonged to the viceroyalty
of New Spain. The Crown, wary of possible corruption and waning loyalty in the New World administration, carefully appointed one viceroy in each viceroyalty who acted as the representative of the monarch. It was imperative that the viceroy remain loyal to the Crown because the position came with many responsibilities and powers; for instance, the viceroy was the chief military officer, chose clerical officials, controlled the treasury, and maintained law and order. He exercised virtually absolute executive authority over the viceregal territory and day-to-day administrative matters. As discussed below, however, this position did not come without checks on power; the viceroy had to work within the large colonial bureaucratic system, present even on local levels (Huck 2008: 32).

In 1527, in an effort to solidify Spanish power in the Americas, the monarchy established an audiencia, or Royal Court, with the authority to advise the viceroy and govern the colonies. In New Spain alone there were as many as five audiencias from the time of their creation until the end of Spanish occupation. Oidores, or judges, made up the members of the audiencia and were in charge of judicial affairs. The audiencia also had a regent, a notary, a constable and two attorneys (Grayson 1998: 4). They had the power to advise the viceroy on executive and legislative issues, and essentially held administrative, legislative and judicial responsibilities. The Spanish Crown expected the audiencia and the viceroy to report on any misconduct carried out by the other (Kirkwood 2010: 64).

In order to prevent potential corruption and to be certain the Crown’s wishes were executed, a visitador occasionally traveled from Spain to inspect the affairs of the
colonies. This also served as a check against the power of the viceroy in New Spain as the visits were spontaneous. Even though the bureaucrats of the colonial administration could bribe and corrupt the visitador, these checks of power had the important function of providing multiple information flows to the Crown, and helped to decentralize authority within the colony (Huck 2008: 37).

While the traditional European patterns of royalism and absolutism were strongly present in the Spanish colonies, a local bureaucracy still existed (Huck 2008: 30). If the audiencia, viceroy and visitador made up the colonial bureaucracy at the national level, the cabildos, regidores and corregidores made up the local bureaucracy. The ayuntamiento (city hall) had its own locally elected cabildo (city council) with regidores (council members) responsible for local affairs. Rather than the native population, only the colonizers could exclusively participate in the cabildo. The corregidor operated on a local level under the control of the audiencias, collected duties and maintained order. Some corregidores worked in Spanish towns and others in Indian villages. Because the Crown appointed the corregidor to oversee the affairs of the local government, the regidores could pay the corregidor to overlook any misconduct that occurred in the local government. In many ways the governing infrastructure institutionalized the corrupt conditions, and even though the Crown prohibited unethical behavior, there was no way of logistically enforcing such rules (Kirkwood 2010: 66).

In addition to the highly centralized political institutions the Spanish created and imposed in the New World, they set up economic institutions to incorporate the indigenous into a slave labor system called the encomienda. By creating the encomienda,
the Spanish forcibly integrated the indigenous into their economic system which supplied them with a permanent labor force. The Spanish justified this oppressive economic system by providing the indigenous with an education in the Spanish language and Catholic faith in exchange for their work on the hacienda. As a result, this left the indigenous without any monetary compensation for their work, and without the ability to economically advance in the colonial system. With highly centralized executive institutions and a slave labor system, the Spanish colonizers concentrated power within a very small group of elites, and permanently established the inferior status of the indigenous. By doing so, the Europeans dominated the colonial infrastructure (Kirkwood 2010: 57-8).

Colonial displacement of traditional indigenous governance structures with a new centralized hierarchy was significant to Mexican history in that it completely altered the political system and social hierarchy that the indigenous had put in place up to that point. Because the colonizers believed the natives to be inferior and could not readily identify with their way of life, the Spanish suppressed them rather than incorporating them into the new political system; the indigenous never regained the influence they held prior to colonization. As we shall see, this had profound ramifications for future political development in Mexico when the post-colonial elite came to power; for example, the newly formed elite class adopted and reinforced a similar system after decolonization. Thus, a dominant executive office under colonial rule created and supported the tradition of a rigid social hierarchy which then translated to extremely dominant executive offices that served the same purpose in the modern Mexican state.
Apart from the intricate governing system the Spanish put in place, other unanticipated events occurred in colonial society. The Spanish began their conquest with the goal of economic gains and the belief they were doing their moral duty by spreading their Catholic faith. Yet by living so closely with the indigenous, the mixing of different races created new social classes. *Peninsulares* referred to Spanish colonizers born on the Iberian Peninsula; *criollos* referred to full-blooded Spaniards born in the Americas; and *mestizos* referred to people of half indigenous, half Spanish heritage.

Such distinctions were politically relevant, because as the new political administration was carved out in the colonies, the Catholic Kings were very cautious about who could hold certain positions. As previously stated, they only wanted the most loyal of men to run the colonies. For this reason, the Crown only permitted *peninsulares* to hold important government positions. Although full-blooded Spaniards, the *criollos* could only hold political offices on the local level as the Crown denied them access to higher positions in the government, military and the church. These local institutions put the *criollos* in limited leadership positions, and they gained basic governing experience by holding office inside of an exclusive, centralized regime (Quesada 2001: 67).

Nonetheless, the *criollos* and the *peninsulares* still shared a common identity based on the rejection of the “inferior” native population to the socio-political system.

At the end of the 18th century, the powerful Spanish empire was in danger because the precious metals and cash crops were not enough to support the expenditures of the mother country. Spain experienced declining revenues, high inflation and its military power was considerably diminished; the Spanish empire was spread too thinly to govern
efficiently. As Spain made reforms back on the Iberian Peninsula, it also applied those same administrative reforms in the Americas. Known as the Bourbon Reforms, the Spanish Crown introduced these changes in the hopes of making the colonial institutions more efficient. However, these reforms exposed the weakness in the colonial infrastructure, and actually encouraged the colonies to push for independence (Kirkwood 2010: 69).

The most important alterations made within the political system that resulted from the Bourbon Reforms involved access to government positions. Prior to the Bourbon Reforms, *criollos* held relatively important positions in the church, military and government. As the Spanish rearranged institutions to reduce corruption, the Crown placed only *peninsulares* in new government positions, assuming they would remain forever loyal to Spain. It was at this point that the *criollos* and *peninsulares*’ collective identities began to diverge. As a result of the reforms, “the *criollos* continued to affirm their Spanish heritage, but at the same time began to praise their American homeland” (Quesada 2001: 67, translation mine). They believed they had a connection with the American land the *peninsulares* did not because they had only known life in the New World, and thus developed an identity connected to it. The Bourbon Reforms took away some opportunities to lead, but importantly, *criollos* could still gain influence in the military, and large numbers took advantage of this opportunity (Quesada 2001: 67).

The formation of this new identity among *criollos* played an extremely significant role in the independence movement; this new-found nationalism inspired the *criollos’* push for independence. The *criollos* understood that under the colonial administration,
which was based on a highly stratified and rigid social structure, they would never be able to gain sufficient access to the system. They shared the common aspiration of replacing the *peninsulares* in the system, and their nationalistic sentiments were incentive for bringing a change.

Several factors caused the solidification of the *criollos’* sentiments for their birthplace, and from that the full-blown independence movement. The extreme exclusivity of the political system, in part, led to its demise. Although *criollos* developed a collective identity based on exclusion from the colonial political system, they also felt pride for their natal land. The *peninsulares* were quick to find fault with the “inferior” culture in the Americas, whereas the *criollos* wanted to break away from Spain, and to use the economic potential of the rural landscape to form their own states. The *criollos* began to develop a form of nationalism based on the rejection of Spanish domination, all the while believing they could form their own nations free from imperial rule. Tired of never being considered equal in social status or having an equal opportunity to participate in politics, the *criollos* fought against the *peninsulares* for leadership in the colonies. Importantly, it was this particular shared collective identity among the *criollos* that really spurred the independence movement (Quesada 2001: 79-80).

Other factors such as the French Revolution, the Independence of the United States and the progressive ideas the Enlightenment generated in Europe also gave the *criollos* the belief that they themselves could carry out similar movements in the Spanish colonies to gain their own independence (Quesada 2001: 81). Furthermore, the French invasion and occupation of Spain precipitated a leadership crisis in the country (Huck
This created the very opportunity for which the *criollos* had been waiting, and ultimately led to the wars of independence in Mexico beginning in 1810 and ending in 1821 (Quesada 2001: 81).

While the *criollos* primarily fought these wars because they wanted change, it became obvious that they did not want structural change. They fully supported the structure of colonial institutions; they were interested in power and influence, and they sought to eliminate the colonizer as a means of accomplishing this goal. In this way, colonialism set up the very institutions and social structures that became an ingrained part of Mexico’s politics post-independence. Moreover, the same social groups that held political positions during colonialism continued to do so after independence by creating a dominant executive office to perpetuate the marginalization and exclusion of minority groups. Thus, the same social groups the elite marginalized during colonialism continued to be repressed as a consequence of the collective identity the elite established during that time.

Importantly, neither the indigenous nor the *mestizos* fought the wars of independence; the *criollos* were the principal advocates for independence, as they pursued their own interests. They did not fight for a democratic government, nor did they want to have a political system that protected the rights of the indigenous. They aspired to develop a political system structured similar to the colonial one where they could replace the *peninsulares* and become the new governing elite. Therefore, Mexico’s colonial history was significant to its modern political development in that those who became elite under the colonial social hierarchy and organized the independence movement were
directly responsible for perpetuating executive dominance after decolonization; it was never in their interest to create an open, inclusive government. It was this collective identity that prompted them to continue marginalizing the indigenous through the creation of a dominant executive office. In the absence of the Spanish colonizers, the *criollos* were the only group that had experience with governance, and who had held leadership positions. Consequently, they structurally fell into leadership roles during and after the war for independence, and ensured their dominance through the exclusion of “the others.” They created a government that was just as exclusive as the colonial administration, and that continued to marginalize the same groups of society the Spanish had most marginalized.

**Colonial Structures in a Post-Colonial Era**

From 1810-1821, the *criollos* declared an official break from the Spanish empire, and fought for 11 years to win their independence. Back on the peninsula, the Spanish Crown faced severe economic problems at the beginning of the 19th century which facilitated a breakdown of political authority in the American colonies. A priest by the name of Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla launched the Mexican Wars of Independence with his speech “*Grito de Dolores*” (cry of Dolores), and led a revolt against the colonial government alongside the *criollos*. Despite a divergence in collective identity at the time of independence, many *criollos* still identified with the European culture and felt alienated from Mexico’s poor, indigenous and *mestizo* population. Therefore, they considered that a disincentive to make a radical break from the established colonial order by including the indigenous in their political system (“Wars of Independence” 1996).
However, after Mexican independence in 1821, the state lacked political unity and suffered severe instability because of this. The following fifty years of Mexican political history was characterized by the violent, authoritarian rule of military men known as *caudillos*. *Caudillos* took advantage of this instability to gain power through the use of force, while also using repressive techniques to maintain it. They established an exclusive circle of loyal supporters, and gained the popular support of the people through their charismatic speeches promising reform and progress for the state. They used violence to oust their political opponents, and then a system of patronage allowed them to use state resources to reward their followers. During these fifty years, power shifted hands between *caudillo* rulers roughly eighty times (Healy 2008: 2).

The Mexican government continued in the same fashion from 1821 until 1872: violence and military might served as the determining factor in presidential succession. In this period of time, oppressive dictators were successful in keeping the government the exclusive domain of the *criollo* elite (“Centralism and the Caudillo State” 1996). In 1872 Porfirio Díaz came to power by leading a coup d’État, and then set up another authoritarian regime. In many ways his regime was no different than any that had come before it because it perpetuated the strong, centralized executive power that had been present since colonial rule. Furthermore, he used this dominant executive power as a tool for marginalizing those who did not belong to the collective identity of the ruling class. Yet his regime was exceptional in that it set in motion the events that initiated the Mexican Revolution, and subsequently the modern Mexican state (Kirkwood 2010: 126).
The indigenous social hierarchy was unlike that which the Europeans introduced in various ways, which presents key implications for post-colonial development. In general, the indigenous societies were more flexible in that people could achieve a higher rank by proving themselves valuable to the empire; for example, military men, artisans, and slaves alike could improve their condition in Aztec society. Moreover, social classes were based on profession and heredity, rather than language or skin color. The Spanish social hierarchy was solely based on skin color, language, purity of blood and their monotheistic religion. For the colonizers, light skin, the Spanish language, a pure European heritage, a devotion to the Catholic religion and a Western education were the fundamentals of the Spanish collective identity. In their opinion, those were the most important virtues a person could possess; without these virtues, the Spanish considered a person barbaric and inferior, and was treated as such in colonial society. Post-colonial development was founded on the creation of a dominant executive office with the objective of perpetuating the exclusion of the native people, or anyone who did not pertain to their established collective identity.

The Spanish colonization of Mexico was an extremely significant time period in Mexico’s history because it was during this time that new social classes formed, that the criollos developed their own nationalistic sentiments apart from the peninsulares, and that they used their collective identity to gain support for an independence movement. They rebelled against the peninsulares in the political system when they thought the administration was not being sympathetic to their interests. The colonial period laid a foundation for the continuation of these political traditions in modern Mexican politics as
the state passed from colonial occupation to independence. Porfirio Díaz was responsible for perpetuating these traditions even fifty years after independence.
CHAPTER III
FROM PORFIRIO DÍAZ TO A MODERN MEXICAN STATE

Fifty years after Mexican independence, authoritarian rule and political violence were still key components of the political system, and the government had yet to transition to civilian rule. The fight between the major political factions over how the country should be governed and how presidential successors should be determined was still a serious problem for the elite, though few advocated an open, democratic system. It was this inability to come to a consensus that caused such instability in national politics. Leaders such as Porfirio Díaz, as well as many of the politicians who followed him, resorted to repressive techniques and an intricate system of patronage in an attempt to maintain stability.

Porfirio Díaz’s reign, known as the Porfiriato, was characterized by a centralized authoritarian system, and laid the groundwork for the strong presidents who succeeded him (Grindle 2007: 476). He ruled Mexico in an oppressive and militaristic way, continuing to deny Mexican citizens civil liberties. He used intimidation, bribery, torture and assassination to keep all of those who did not agree with his political views suppressed. At the time, many political figures argued such repression of liberties was necessary in order to have economic progress in that political unrest could threaten economic development in newly emerging states (Handelman 2011: 34). Even though Díaz brought substantial progress to the country economically, his failure to bring
political progress created rural unrest and discontent. The *Porfiriato* created a growing urban working class that wanted more access to the government, yet the political system remained closed to them (Huck 2008: 75).

Díaz’s regime institutionalized a system of patronage in the Mexican state. Rather than solely using force with his enemies, Díaz often won their favor through patronage; he doled out civilian posts and access to lucrative business concessions to his supporters. However, he resorted to outright repression when he was unable to convert opponents. He eventually traded “ballots for bullets” in order to gain his objective: the maintenance of his post as state leader, and the stability of the state through economic progress. Díaz promoted such a political system in the sense that he held elections during his rule, but they were neither fair nor free because he constantly eliminated politicians who presented themselves as opposition candidates (Gonzalez 2002: 72).

Díaz used the state as a mechanism for patronage, and for controlling change and keeping interest groups in line. For instance, he allied himself with wealthy families allowing them to continue their business on their *haciendas* so that he would have their political support. Díaz additionally appropriated large sections of land that belonged to the agrarian workers in order to augment the land of the *hacienda* owners. He treated the national government as his private domain using it to stifle the media, the influence of the church and other elites who did not share his ideology, all the while rewarding his supporters. Díaz maintained colonial political traditions in that he fashioned a dominant executive office with the objective of perpetuating the exclusion of “the others,” or anyone who did not belong to the elite collective identity. His system of patronage and
the continuation of colonial political practices laid the foundation for a strong corporatist state, which appeared a few decades later (Grayson 1998: xi).

The exclusivity of the Porfirian system did not allow for the creation and nurturing of a future political and economic leadership, and it was Díaz’s oppressive and exclusive rule that set in motion the events that sparked the Mexican Revolution of 1910 (Grayson 1998: 10-11). Díaz constantly reassured the public he would not run for reelection, but did so anyway. In 1910, Francisco I. Madero emerged as a serious challenger to Díaz when he managed to win the support of the political center with his moderate platform. Madero promised democracy without social or economic change, and that he would not run for reelection at the end of his term. Díaz still held the presidency, however, and sent Madero to jail while rigging the elections. This upset not only various people within the government, but also the Mexican citizens (Gonzales 2002: 72).

Madero’s platform and support indicated the political tension that was growing as a consequence of the political practices the Spanish institutionalized during colonization. In other words, the post-colonial elite established a political system similar to that of the colonizers in that it was an exclusive, centralized system based on a social hierarchy that marginalized lower social classes. As a result of the perpetuation of these colonial-era practices, many citizens demanded the opening of the political system, and supported Madero because they believed he was capable of bringing this change. For this reason, Madero’s popular support signified increasing opposition to the status quo, and therefore is an important aspect of Mexico’s post-colonial political development in that it eventually provoked the 1910 Revolution.
Madero escaped imprisonment by disguising himself as a railroad worker, and fled to Texas to seek asylum where he organized against Díaz. His call to arms – the Plan of San Luis Potosí – focused on political reform but sidestepped the social and economic concerns of peasants, workers, and nationalists. One major issue among the Mexican people was land reform, yet Madero hardly made mention of this in his plan. Madero’s main concern was political reform; he strongly believed that the chief executive should serve only one term, in the decentralization of government powers and in free market capitalism. To him, these were more important than the redistribution of land to the individuals who had lost it through illegal state activity. Furthermore, he was not interested in political opening in that he did not advocate broadening political participation to the poor and the indigenous. Therefore, since he was prepared to use the dominance of the executive office as a means of perpetuating the exclusion of the native people, or those who did not pertain to the elite collective identity, Madero supported the continuation of colonial political practices (Gonzales 2002: 73).

Madero’s organization combined with broad opposition to Díaz’s regime and general disputes over important political and social issues led to the Revolution of 1910. While revolutionaries opposed Díaz, they disagreed on several substantive issues regarding what to implement in his place. Zapata, Villa and Carranza became the leaders of the three main factions that dominated the revolution. Emiliano Zapata focused on peasant rights and land reform. He backed Madero in his fight against Díaz, but when Zapata realized Madero was not truly interested in agrarian reform, he turned against him. Zapata offered his Plan of Ayala in response to Madero’s Plan of San Luis Potosí,
and called for the redistribution of land, the rule of law and electoral democracy (Benjamin 2000: 5).

Zapata’s faction was a crucial aspect of the revolution in that it was the first time since Mexican independence that anyone posed a real challenge to the entrenched political system. Because the post-colonial elite formed their collective identity based, in part, on the social hierarchy the colonizers first developed, they also viewed the indigenous as “the others.” Therefore, Zapata symbolized the indigenous and peasant groups which the elite administration had marginalized for hundreds of years. Zapata’s failure or success in the revolution determined whether or not those specific groups would continue to be marginalized in the post-colonial era.

Francisco “Pancho” Villa, the leader of the second main faction, also supported Madero. However, Villa differed from Zapata in that he remained loyal to the Plan of San Luis Potosí. Although he did not have a well-developed revolutionary platform or strong nationalistic views, he advocated an egalitarian society based on the redistribution of land among his soldiers and the establishment of new military colonies. He additionally supported foreign investment in the Mexican state (Gonzales 2002: 126).

Venustiano Carranza was the leader of the third faction who initially served as a minor official under the Díaz regime, but later put his support behind Madero. When Madero was not able to fulfill all of the demands the different factions of the revolution called for, he lost their support. Carranza, the most prominent leader of the three at this point, created the Plan of Guadalupe which called for the restoration of the constitutional government established in 1857, reforms to ensure an independent judiciary and land
reform via an *ejido* system. Under the *ejido* system the government would promote the people’s communal use of the land in the community by taking land from the elite and giving it to landless peasants (Benjamin 2000: 5).

The diverse social, economic and political backgrounds of the three revolutionary leaders could perhaps explain their opposing platforms. Zapata and Villa came from humble social backgrounds and favored agrarian reform and regional autonomy; Carranza came from a relatively wealthy family, and wanted a strong central government committed to economic modernization; and neither of the other revolutionaries truly shared Zapata’s zeal for agrarian reform. Furthermore, Zapata and Villa advocated the expansion of political participation in the system. Zapata rebelled against the political system because it failed to include the indigenous and poor population, whereas Carranza viewed the complete control of the executive office over state affairs as a useful strategy for economic modernization (Gonzalez 2002: 133).

Toward the end of the Revolution, two prominent political factions developed: the Constitutionalists and the Conventionists, representing contradictory views on many important issues. The Constitutionalists, led by Carranza, were middle class, liberal citizens who wanted the nationalization of Mexican land and resources. The Constitutionalists ultimately advocated a constitution that would benefit Mexico’s *hacienda* owners. Zapata and Villa led the Conventionists, and rather than merely restoring it, this faction wanted to propose radical liberal reforms to the 1857 Constitution. For instance, they wanted specific, well-orchestrated measures for agrarian and labor reform to be laid out, both of which the Constitution at the time never
adequately addressed. The Conventionists essentially wanted a constitution that would restore the hacienda land to its rightful owners, the peasants (Gonzalez 2002: 133).

Madero began to lose support because of the factionalization, and his reliance on the federal army made him vulnerable to counterrevolutionaries. He was assassinated in 1913, after which the revolution spiraled out of control (Gonzales 2002: 110). By 1914, the factions were so strongly polarized that the Revolution became a prolonged civil war. It was Carranza’s faction, the Constitutionalists, that was victorious among the revolutionary forces, and that eventually gained control of Mexico City and leadership in the national government. Carranza and his loyal caudillos were then responsible for creating the 1917 Constitution (Gonzales 2002: 133-4).

As a consequence of the unresolved problems decolonization left behind, there was an immense pressure on the state. The 1910 Revolution was important in that various factions broke out in order to address these problems which the elite state leaders had yet to solve. Each faction of the revolution embodied a different class of the social hierarchy created during colonization. Zapata’s faction represented the indigenous and poor population of which the elite had taken advantage, and therefore he promoted the inclusion of these sectors of society into the political system. Villa’s faction generally represented those who wanted access to the political system for themselves, but not necessarily the poor or indigenous; as mestizos, they still viewed themselves as superior to those sectors of society. Finally, Carranza’s faction represented the elite who wanted to maintain control of the state and its executive dominance. When the revolution ended, the same elites who were at the top of the hierarchy under colonization, or Carranza’s
faction, remained in this same position. Thus, the elite group that was in charge of creating a new constitution for the state in 1917 had the same political goals as those who headed the colonial hierarchy: to create a state system that established a dominant executive office with ability to exclude those that did not belong to their collective identity, or the lower social classes. This is a significant element in Mexican history because although a century had passed since decolonization, the same elite group created the constitution in a way that allowed the executive office to control who had access to national politics, thereby perpetuating the exclusion of the native people, or anyone who did not belong to their established collective identity.

With the forging of the 1917 Constitution came a difficult process of negotiation because each faction of the revolution was struggling to have its interests protected; often times the factions’ objectives were conflicting in that each was vying for more control within the political system. In the Constitutional Convention of 1916, Carranza did not permit his opponents to be represented. Instead, he presented the delegates with a draft for a new constitution that recommended various political, electoral and judicial reforms that he thought were necessary, and excluded reforms important to opposing factions. Although Carranza’s supporters backed his draft for a constitution in the Convention of 1916, the opposing factions were not pleased with Carranza’s refusal to incorporate their ideas into the Constitution. Carranza proved himself more than reluctant to cooperate with those who opposed his views; the Constitutionalists assassinated anyone daring to challenge their power, including Zapata and Villa (Gonzales 2002: 162).
The Constitution was officially signed on February 5, 1917, and it prescribes a federal republic consisting of 31 states and a federal district (“The Constitution of 1917” 1996). While there is separation of powers among three branches, they do not share the power equally in practice, in part because of powers granted in the Constitution, and in part because of the political practices modern political parties adopted later in Mexican history. Constitutionally, executive sponsored bills submitted to Congress take precedence over other congressional business; virtually all bills of any importance originate in the executive branch (Hauss 2009: 483). This allows the president to heavily influence the national agenda. The president also has the ability to appoint and dismiss cabinet officials and almost all employees of the executive branch. He/she appoints ambassadors, consuls general, Supreme Court judges and the mayor of the federal district, in addition to a wide range of midlevel offices in semiautonomous agencies, secretariats and cabinet-level agencies (“Government Structure” 1996).

Even with these formal powers, the office has derived most of its strength from less formal powers. First, the mode in which the incumbent chief executive selected the presidential candidate had a great deal to do with the dominance of the president as a figure. For the selection process, the president first consulted with key members from the political party in order to create a list of potential successors from among the cabinet members. The president then unilaterally chose his successor in an act known as the dedazo. Whether or not a credible opposition candidate existed, the presidential nominee toured the country to keep up the appearance of a competitive election process. With the formation of modern political parties came this method of selecting candidates in 1929,
and it afforded the president a vast amount of informal power in that the president was able to determine the future direction of the country by selecting his successor (Grayson 1998: 22-23).

An additionally significant informal power involves control of the media. While the Mexican press claimed to be free from government censorship, members of the dominant political party frequently had journalists and editors murdered into the 1980’s and 1990’s. Likewise, senior government officials closely monitored the media’s coverage of the administration, and often used directives and bribes to control journalism. Moreover, the ruling president’s party licensed radio and TV stations to allies of the political party so that the corporations running major media sources never publicly criticized the president’s administration (“Mexican Press, Media, TV, Radio, Newspapers” 2011).

Despite the internal divisions and inequalities that existed in Mexico, the constitution was very radical and progressive for the time. It limited church power, included plans for agrarian reform and social security, provided the rights to organize unions and to strike, an established minimum wage, an eight hour work day and universal education. Suffrage was only granted to males at this time in Mexico’s history (Grindle 2007: 478). The framers of the Constitution included these liberal reforms in order to reconcile the interests of the different factions, yet they were of little consequence in the long run.

Even though state leaders established the formal powers of the executive office, formal political institutions and granted numerous liberties to the citizens in 1917,
Carranza decided to ignore the Constitution’s social agenda (Grayson 1998: 13). He was able to do so because after winning the revolution and the majority of support in the government, he effectively suppressed the minority faction that wanted to realize these changes. After all, the Constitution only described the agreed upon changes that the political factions considered necessary within the country; it never expressly mentioned how they would implement them. The Constitution provided a “preliminary blueprint for the rational management of a corporatist state,” and Carranza used the constitution and state institutions to carry out his personal agenda (Grayson 1998: 15).

Since it was not in Carranza’s interest to bring agrarian reform or to open the political system, he easily dismissed the proposals of opposing factions. His choice to ignore the portions of the constitution he thought insignificant illustrates the ability of the president to shape the agenda of the country. Moreover, because of the collective identity that the colonizers previously established and with which Carranza identified, he used executive power to marginalize lower social classes. Thus, post-colonial development in Mexico was founded on and continued to utilize a dominant executive office with the objective of perpetuating the exclusion of the native people, or anyone who did not pertain to their established collective identity.

Reluctant to relinquish his power in the executive, Carranza ran for re-election in 1920 against Álvaro Obregón, but was not successful. When Obregón won the presidency, he inherited the problems Carranza dealt with during his term; he “faced the formidable, some might say impossible, task of rebuilding a war-torn economy and reinventing the Mexican state” (Gonzales 2002: 182). Obregón used his position in the
government to foster alliances within the state, which somewhat stabilized the country. Multiple factions remained after the revolution, making it necessary to create some kind of stability to achieve peaceful governance. Obregón recognized the need to execute some type of agrarian reform, and wanted to provide a solution for peasants who still felt slighted even after the revolution. The president managed to pacify, buy off, exile or execute dangerous rivals, and through the implementation of new programs supplemented the already dominant executive branch (Gonzales 2002: 201).

While the constitution increased the powers of the executive office, the creation of a monolithic political party solidified executive dominance in that it promoted and fortified a strong corporatist state structure. A corporate state is “a socio-political system organized on the basis of functional groups rather than individualism; it tends to be top-down, authoritarian and anti-pluralist,” which provides a mechanism for keeping interest groups in line (Grayson 1998: xi). Sometimes this corporatist state structure takes the form of tripartism in that it is a system of economic corporatism based on the contract of business, labor and state affiliations within the economy (Wiarda 1997: 22). The institution of a monopolistic political party facilitated the standardization of this particular system in Mexico.

President Plutarco Eliás Calles founded what is today the Partido Revolucionario Institucional, or the PRI in 1929 (it was originally named the Partido Nacional Revolucionario). The PRI arose from the need to have a formal institution that would put an end to the violent struggle for power during presidential elections. The winners of the revolution became members of the PRI, and the political party incorporated the losers
into government structures in other ways, discussed below, that would include them in politics while preventing them from actually gaining power. In this way, the PRI institutionalized the various revolutionary groups, keeping them alive but managed. Electoral competition essentially died with the establishment of the PRI, and Mexico formally restored the corporatist tradition that can be seen in several instances throughout Mexican history (Gonzalez 2002: 219).

The PRI became sole proprietor of the state, monopolizing its resources to incorporate all social factions, and building a strong patron-client system used to perpetuate its own dominance (“Institutional Revolutionary Party” 1996). The PRI allowed these groups access to the political system in exchange for financial and political support. However, this is more than a patronage system in that some labor and interest groups actually became part of the political party itself, while the PRI prohibited legal status to those who opposed their political practices.

Even though Mexico experienced many changes in its political system following the formation of the PRI, one aspect of the Mexican state that remained unchanged was the capability of the executive to control national politics. The creation of the PRI is an example of the ability of the elite to effectively maintain an exclusive system that worked to serve their interests for 71 years. The political party was able to maintain this complete dominance of the executive branch for so long because of the corporatist relationship it developed between labor and business interests groups. Therefore, the political machine of the PRI demonstrates that post-colonial development, which was founded on the creation of a dominant executive office with the objective of perpetuating the exclusion
of anyone who did not pertain to the elite collective identity, was still relevant to the modern political development of the Mexican state even 100 years after decolonization.

Although Calles’ leadership and founding of the PRI is what fostered the corporate relationship between the state, labor and business, it was not until Lázaro Cárdenas’ presidency that these interest groups became tangible, and the political party became a solidified corporatist organization. President Calles had prepped Cárdenas to follow him as president in 1934. However, when Cárdenas assumed this position, he made it clear he would not be a puppet of Calles, as previous presidents had been of their predecessors.

Under Cárdenas’ leadership, the PRI originally intended to create a loose confederation of local political bosses, military strongmen, labor unions, business organizations and regional political parties. The PRI absorbed these sectors into the political system while excluding all others from the political arena altogether, namely the indigenous. Cárdenas especially worked to fortify the links between the state and organized labor, as well as business organizations. For example, starting in 1936 most labor unions became affiliated with the PRI through the Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos (CTM). CTM is the most influential and largest confederation of labor unions that represents workers in urban areas; it comprised of over 11,000 labor unions and 5 million union members as late as the 1990’s (“Organized Labor” 1996). In this corporatist relationship, the PRI provides CTM with subsidies in exchange for political support. CTM requires workers to join the union, and consequently the party, in order to be recognized in the workplace, while the PRI provides a number of governmental
positions on the national, state and local level for CTM leaders (“Organized Labor” 1996).

Comparable to labor, the PRI also incorporates business organizations into the state structure; the Confederación de Cámaras Nacionales de Comercio (Concanaco) is the most prominent business association. Not only do individual businessmen participate in politics, but many business groups are also represented in government agencies and commissions, and the organization represents the local Chamber of Commerce before the national government. Moreover, Concanaco provides financial support for the PRI, provided that the PRI promotes economic policies that favor big businesses. One main difference between CTM and Concanaco is that the PRI has officially integrated CTM into the political party, but Concanaco remains a purely a private interest group (“Business Organizations” 1996). Although this state structure remained solid well into the 1990’s, today both labor and business organizations are not nearly as influential in the state as they once used to be (Grayson 1998: 17).

From 1940 until 2000, even though the constitution had set the foundation for a state with a strong executive office, as previously mentioned, the political institution of the PRI enhanced these powers. Several significant patterns evolved in Mexican politics during this period: (1) The president, as head of the state bureaucracy, had complete control over the political party and the military; (2) The party leaders often used the revolution to question the validity of other political voices in the system; (3) Within the system, the state provided the business sector with economic opportunities, and in turn, the business sector financially invested in the PRI and its candidates; (4) The presidents
had the ability to handpick their successor; (5) The men the incumbent chief executive
did not choose to be the next president received a large amount of money, and the party
expected him to give immense support to the selected candidate; (6) The successor
traveled around the country making appearances and speeches to build confidence in the
voters; (7) All members in the bureaucracy retained their positions unless the president
removed them; and (8) the mass media never criticized the administration in any way.
With this selectively inclusive and firmly established state structure, the PRI never had to
worry about violent coups disrupting their rule, or the legislative and judicial branches
impeding their agenda (Grayson 1998: 22-23).

Despite the unrestricted power the PRI attained, the first opposition party
originated in 1939. The Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), initially supported by the
Roman Catholic Church, draws the majority of its support from the urbanized middle
class and the wealthiest regions of the country (“National Action Party” 1996). Although
the PAN has presented candidates for every presidential election, they had little chance of
success before the late 1990’s given the exclusive political system, high levels of
corruption and election fraud (Grayson 1998: 53). The establishment of the PAN as a
major opposition party is relevant for two main reasons. Firstly, it provided a means of
decentralizing the PRI’s political power in the late 1980’s, eventually leading to the PRI’s
democratic overthrow in the 2000 presidential elections. Secondly, while it presented an
opposition to the uncontested power of the PRI, it still failed to give representation to the
indigenous and poor population, a prevailing problem that stemmed from the colonial
displacement of traditional indigenous governance structures.
From the 1930’s to the 1950’s specifically, Mexico’s political power was the most centralized on the national level than any other time in its history. The president especially held a great deal of influence over state affairs. The executive office was so powerful and exclusive that international critics considered Mexico’s political system as semi-authoritarian until the mid-1990’s (Barracca 2007: 174). For instance, despite being a federalist system, the president has historically played a large role in the selection and dismissal of state governors, all of whom were members of the PRI until 1991 (“Government Structure” 1996). However, Mexico was able to break its image as a semi-authoritarian regime in 2000 when Vicente Fox triumphed in the presidential elections and became the first PAN candidate to ever hold the office. This image was shattered even more so when Felipe Calderón, Fox’s predecessor and fellow member of the PAN, won in the 2006 elections. The election of two consecutive PAN members alone was responsible for the partial weakening of the corporatist state structure the PRI established. Nonetheless, it will take more than the election of two PAN Presidents to determine if the PRI state structure will be a Mexican model of the past, or a temporary setback for the PRI (“Mexico” 2010).

Summary and Conclusion

During the pre-colonial period in Mexican history, indigenous civilizations had established social hierarchies with religious elite at the top. Furthermore, the majority of pre-colonial societies, although technologically advanced, were generally decentralized. When the Spanish arrived, they replaced the indigenous political organization with their own administrative system, one that was based on a strict social hierarchy. Recognizing
their dominant position, they used their elite collective identity to push the indigenous to the bottom of the social hierarchy. Power then changed hands to the peninsulares, and in some cases the criollos, under the colonial administration. This elite group maintained power because they were able to create a strong, centralized administration that made it virtually impossible for other social groups to access.

One major legacy of colonialism was the creation of new social classes. The fact that the conquistadores constantly repressed the criollos and denied them high positions within the government directly led to their desire for independence. Yet the criollos were not fighting for independence so that they could guarantee rights for minorities, nor were they fighting for a representative government; they aspired to obtain more power within the same political system the Spanish originally established. Because colonialism dismantled the indigenous social hierarchy and supplanted it with one in which the natives were excluded and marginalized, post-colonial development was founded on the creation of a dominant executive office with the objective of perpetuating the exclusion of anyone who did not pertain to their established collective identity.

When the criollos successfully earned independence, they did not have to fight to remain dominant in the political system. They were simply the only group of people with access to political positions during colonization, and therefore naturally fell into these leadership roles. The colonizers did not permit the remaining groups in society to take part in the political system, thus the colonial administration put “the others” into a position that guaranteed their permanent marginalization. However, under colonialism the criollos had only limited experience holding public offices. As a result, they were not
capable of governing an entire country in that they had no experience doing so.

Moreover, the only political system in which they had ever participated was repressive, centralized and based on the exclusion of “the others”. This was the type of administration that allowed them to exercise nearly absolute power, so it was in their interest to continue governing under this political system.

The Spanish colonizers established their social hierarchy which produced a strong political system as a means of preserving it. The criollos were responsible for perpetuating a similar system in which they created dominant executive offices to repress those who did not pertain to their collective identity. This same system has existed since Mexican independence, and was especially strong during the Porfiriato. Even though Mexicans took part in a revolution where several factions fought against the Díaz regime, the winners who overturned his regime kept the executive office dominant in order to preserve the colonial hierarchy yet again. This meant that the social stratification the colonizers established during the colonial period was still rigidly in place one century later.

Carranza and his faction, those who triumphed in the 1910 Revolution, designed a constitution that kept executive power strong and concentrated, granted significant powers to the president, and in practice, never addressed the rights of the minorities. The main reason the post-independence violence subsided was that the PRI developed a stable mechanism for controlling dissent and selecting presidential successors in 1929. This political party used their excessive power to create a corporate institution that absorbed specific sectors of society while completely ignoring others, signifying a continuation of
colonial practices. Business and labor groups were the most pertinent to the PRI agenda, and therefore the PRI included these sectors. The PRI was able to maintain this monopoly in the government for the same reason the colonial administration could: by concentrating and centralizing power in the hand of a few and creating strong relationships with the powerful financial sectors of society, they made it extremely difficult for any other actors to compete.

In observing the political evolution of Mexico from colonial occupation to modern political institutions, the Spanish colonial administration left a huge impact on Mexican politics, especially with regards to the social hierarchy and executive office. Throughout the majority of Mexico’s history, those in power have used the public administration as a tool, and as a means of maintaining a political regime based on party loyalty, clientelism, and a shared collective identity (Sánchez González 2009: 93). Yet recent trends show Mexico as becoming a more open state on the national and other levels. Due to electoral reform in the 1980’s, more actors within the state have found ways to gain access to the system which has led to recent democratic electoral trends. Gradual changes such as these have led to the evolution of various political processes at the national level. Although Mexico initiated democratic reform, the fact that the state continues to marginalize the voices of the poor and the indigenous remains constant. This suggests that it will be difficult to break with strong political traditions and with the elite collective identity that have become ingrained in Mexican culture since the time of colonization.
CHAPTER IV
VENEZUELA

While the vast majority of the colonized regions in Latin America experienced the same rule under colonization, not all of the regions achieved the same level of development before the Spanish arrived. Prior to colonization, some regions had highly evolved hierarchies and centralized political systems that originated centuries earlier. Others had less advanced societies, but developed some level of societal organization nonetheless. Indigenous groups that lived in what is now Venezuela had relatively simple political and social structures. Upon colonization, the Spanish Crown imposed the same institutions in Venezuela that it did throughout the rest of Latin America, and “racial mixing” between the Europeans and the indigenous also took place. As with Mexico, this imposition of the Spanish social hierarchy dismantled the natives’ political organization, and paved the way for the establishment of a dominant executive office that would prevent all sectors of society that did not belong to the elite’s collective identity from participating. This chapter will examine the societal and political organization that existed before the colonization of Venezuela, the institutions the Spanish introduced during the colonial period, and how these changes the Spanish instigated during their occupation led to the formation of a strong executive office.
Pre-Colonial Society

Before Spanish explorers arrived on Venezuelan territory for the first time in 1498, about 500,000 different indigenous groups populated the region. In the period preceding Spanish colonization, the Venezuelan native population was unlike many others in Latin America in that its civilizations were comparatively less advanced; they did not develop methods of writing, and established simple political organizations (Tarver 2005: 21). The basic political and social structure of these indigenous groups was the chiefdom. Chiefdoms organized around a common language and a shared culture, and achieved both political and economic affiliation with other nearby chiefdoms. The people utilized the land communally for subsistence farming; they worked collectively to cultivate food, to construct dwellings and to complete other daily tasks, and they shared the land and the fruits of their labor equally. Furthermore, apart from tribal leaders, members of society were generally seen as equals. These indigenous societies principally depended on agriculture, although some groups supplemented their crops with hunting and gathering. On the whole, chiefdoms functioned separately, without any overarching collective identity; however, the political association across chiefdoms was stronger in times of war (Morón 1964: 22).

The Arawak people formed one important group in Venezuela. They had the largest population among the various indigenous groups, and therefore were culturally dominant in the coastal region. Like the other native groups in Venezuela at this time, the socio-political structure of Arawak society consisted of loosely affiliated chiefdoms spread across the region. Moreover, the Arawaks organized themselves into chiefdoms
based on familial relations. If the chiefdoms were substantial in size, the leaders further divided the people into several smaller clans (Tarver 2005: 23).

In the Arawak hierarchy, the chief artisans were the nobility, and below them were farmers, fishers and unskilled laborers (Tarver 2005: 23). The cacique, or chief, was the leader of the chiefdom, and a number of nobles would help the cacique to govern if the group was large enough. The people either elected the wisest man among the group to lead, or the father passed the position to his son; the people considered the cacique the father of the chiefdom. He led his people on a day-to-day basis, was responsible for distributing land and crops and made all decisions regarding war. In the event of a war, he additionally served as war leader (“The Arawaks” 2010).

Carib groups became increasingly dominant in Venezuela towards the end of the Pre-Columbian period. They achieved a more advanced level of development in relation to the Arawaks in the sense that they studied astronomy, created a calendar for different agricultural seasons and used diverse materials from the environment to build houses. The Carib people, being semi-nomadic and exceptional navigators, used their navigation skills to create an extensive trading system among different chiefdoms in the region (Tarver 2005: 23).

The Caribs were a unique group in that they had two different leaders in their chiefdoms: a formal chief and a war chief. This says a great deal about the Carib people, indicating that war was a central component of their culture. The elders of the tribe (ex-warriors) selected the war chief; they required this soldier to be brave, strong and skilled in battle. Caribs had the utmost respect for the elders and warriors of their community.
They often waged war on other chiefdoms, and ate parts of their fallen adversaries when victorious in battle in order to acquire their strength. Because of their experience in battle and zeal for physical confrontation, the Caribs launched a fierce resistance movement in attempt to repel the Spanish when they arrived in the Americas (Tarver 2005: 24).

The Carib hierarchy formally placed the *cacique* and war chief at the top, the priests and elders in the middle, and the warriors and hunters below the rest. However, this was a very loose concept of a hierarchy in that it was considerably mobile, and there were no rigid, distinct divisions between the different social groups. For instance, all males were warriors and hunters, and any Carib male could earn the position of priest, formal or war chief by proving their loyalty and bravery in battle. The women’s role in Carib society was additionally important because it was their completion of domestic chores that enabled the men to lead the tribe and to conduct warfare (“Caribs” 2005).

The Venezuelan region was also unique in the sense that it had a very small indigenous population compared to other Latin American countries. Thus, the Spanish encountered a large number of relatively small and unrelated chiefdoms with widely varying degrees of cultural sophistication at the time of the conquest. Some were nomadic groups that survived by hunting and gathering, while others built cities and sustained their people by fishing and the use of advanced agriculture techniques (“Population” 1990). Some were bellicose, like the Caribs and others were peaceful, like the Arawaks. In addition, various indigenous civilizations that lived in the jungle before the Spanish conquest continued to do so afterwards as a means of avoiding the violence and disease the colonizers brought with them (“Ethnic Groups” 1990).
Prior to colonization, there were no major political authorities or empires that governed the people in the Venezuelan region. For this reason, pre-colonial society was decentralized with a low level of organization. Moreover, their social hierarchies were relatively flexible in that many members could advance in society by earning their position as a chief, warrior, artisan or priest. Their societies were also based on communal living arrangements where members of the chiefdoms equally contributed to the well-being of their community. Consequently, the social and political hierarchy the colonizers instituted was a completely foreign system to the indigenous (“Spanish Colonial Life” 1990).

**Colonial Society and Independence**

When the Spanish *conquistadores* began to colonize the Americas in the 1500’s, Venezuela initially interested them because of its valuable geographic location; it provided the colonizers with a secure coastline for commerce. Yet relative to other Spanish colonies, Venezuela held less value because the country had no significant material wealth; nonetheless, Spain continued to use the land to cultivate cacao and coffee. As a result of the general disinterest in the land, the colonial administration governing the Venezuelan region “lacked political unity for the first two and a half centuries of colonial rule” (“Spanish Colonial Life” 1990). What is today Venezuela originally fell under the jurisdiction of several different *audiencias* before the Spanish Crown finally placed it under the viceroyalty of New Granada (“Spanish Colonial Life” 1990).
Similar to all Spanish colonies, the colonial administration and government institutions completely replaced indigenous political structures in Venezuela. By 1550, the Crown had put in place a rigid and centralized system of offices, regulations and relationships. As with Mexico, the viceroy was the primary figure of authority in his respective viceroyalty. *Oidores* were members of the *audiencias* who, in conjunction with the viceroy, were the closest officials to the Spanish monarchy, and served as a centralized source of authority in the Americas. The *audiencias* governed the *gobernaciones* and the *presidencias*, which comprised a second administrative level in the Americas. *Gobernaciones* were provincial territorial divisions with one governor presiding over the region. *Presidencias* were also territorial divisions, but the president of the *audiencia* governed this territory (Tarver 2005: 34). The *cabildos*, or town councils, signified the beginning of the first local institutions in the colonial period. Unique to Venezuela was the amount of autonomy the local officials enjoyed; local governments could exercise more power in Venezuela because their location was fairly far from the Spanish political centers (Tarver 2005: 34-35).

While Venezuela lacked the mineral wealth that drew the attention of the Spanish Crown in other regions, as noted earlier, it was rich with fertile agricultural lands. For this reason, the Spanish required a large labor force to work the land. Since the Spanish Crown technically established laws to prohibit the enslavement of the indigenous (Law of Burgos, Valladolid Laws and Ordinances Concerning Treatment of Indians), and because the indigenous population in the region was rather small, there was an elevated demand for the importation of African slaves. The Europeans brought the first African slaves to
Venezuela around 1528; Venezuela was responsible for approximately 1.3% of the entire slave trade in the Americas (Quesada 2001: 49).

This enhanced labor force facilitated the colonial economic system known as the *encomienda*, becoming the “most abusive and destructive system in the Americas” (“The Encomienda System in New Spain” 2009). Before colonization, the indigenous used the land for subsistence purposes. However, the Europeans dismissed the laws prohibiting the exploitation of the indigenous, claimed ownership of the land and forced the natives to join the Spanish economy. Since the indigenous did not possess the capital to buy property, nor did the Spanish monetarily compensate them for their work on the *encomiendas*, they fell into an unending cycle of servitude (“The Encomienda System in New Spain” 2009).

The *encomendero*, or master of the *encomienda*, was in charge of a certain portion of the indigenous population. In exchange for protection and an education in the Spanish language and Catholic faith, the natives worked the land of the *latifundias* (or large estates with commercial orientation). It was on these *encomiendas* that racial mixing precipitated the creation of new, racially-mixed social classes. Color and social origin were exceedingly important in the colonies, and only those of pure European heritage enjoyed the greatest prestige and power. Although intermarriage between the different classes was not acceptable in society, many *mestizos*, blacks and natives tried to have children with the Spanish in order to save their children from a life of penury. Likewise, those of European decent used any means possible to keep the non-white population at a distance, eager to dismiss any doubts regarding their pure heritage (“Population” 1990).
The establishment of the Spanish socio-political hierarchy was important in that it was starkly different from the indigenous one, and completely altered the indigenous way of life. Firstly, the Spanish hierarchy was extremely rigid with a vertical organization, and there was an immense gap between those who governed the colonies versus those who made up the lower classes; the elite owned vast amounts of land and capital, whereas the indigenous rarely possessed either. Moreover, Spanish discrimination against the indigenous, blacks and mestizos further limited their ability to pursue such commodities. This contrasts the indigenous hierarchy in that the natives established a relatively horizontal political organization. Venezuelan indigenous civilizations did differentiate between those of higher rank in their societies. Yet the indigenous derived this manner of differentiation from specialized occupations, and members in society could easily earn a higher position by proving their worth to the chiefdom in battle, or by being a productive member of the community.

Secondly, the Spanish hierarchy established a disparate set of values for determining who was worthy of holding a leadership position in the administration. The Spanish placed a great deal of importance on a pure heritage, skin color, language and a European education. It was essentially impossible for anyone to advance in colonial society unless they spoke Spanish, had a lighter skin tone and possessed a purely European heritage. Furthermore, those who made up the elite class heavily discriminated against anyone who did not meet these criteria because they considered them fundamentally inferior. On the other hand, the Venezuelan indigenous population selected their leaders based on experience in battle, loyalty to the chiefdom and the
ability to contribute to communal tasks. Members of society normally respected one another because each person played an integral role when contributing to communal duties, as noted above. Finally, the indigenous people often chose their leaders by consensus rather than social status.

The new socio-political hierarchy the colonizers defined was also significant in that racial mixing created new social classes, ones in which the European elites categorized the indigenous into a lower social class that they subsequently excluded from their new political system. Thus, the new social classes colonizers created completely overturned the former social structure of Venezuelan society. The main social divisions included peninsulares, criollos, mestizos, mulattos and zambos. As in Mexico, peninsulares were people of pure Spanish heritage born in Spain; criollos were full-blooded Spaniards born in the Americas; mestizos were those of Spanish and indigenous ancestry; mulattos were those of Spanish and African heritage; and zambos were those of African and indigenous ancestry (“The Encomienda System in New Spain” 2009).

Despite the mestizos’ slightly superior status over the indigenous and African population, they still did not have the same economic opportunities as the upper social classes; many mestizos worked as artisans or as domestic servants for the Spanish. Mestizos could also work on the haciendas of the Spanish elite, and unlike the indigenous, the Spanish did not require them to do the same menial jobs as they held supervisory positions, and mediated between the indigenous and the hacienda owners. If mestizos had few opportunities in society to improve their situation, the indigenous, mulattos and zambos had even fewer; they were either slaves on the Spanish haciendas,
or the Spanish forced them to remote pieces of land in which they had no interest (Lockhart 1972: 190-1). It was this exclusion, among other factors, that later inspired the Venezuelan *criollo* elite to look for ways to replace the *peninsulares* in their centralized hierarchy.

As in other Spanish colonies, the *criollos* could only hold positions on the local level of government because the Spanish Crown denied them access to higher positions. This fostered anti-colonial attitudes among the *criollos* who desired a larger role in politics. As a consequence of the severe social stratification, the *criollos* began to develop a collective identity based on their sentiments for their American birthplace, in addition to their lack of access to important political, military and clerical posts. In this way, the *criollos* used their new-found nationalism to bring about the independence movement so that they could replace the *peninsulares* in the current political system.

The *criollos* led the revolutionary efforts and, above all, aimed to take power from the *peninsulares* and put it into their own hands. The independence movement that formed in Venezuela was not a popular one; the elite *criollos* were largely responsible for carrying out the independence movement. As it was, the Spanish elite did not include the majority of the Venezuelan people in their political system, and therefore the lower social classes were not accustomed to political activization. The revolution started in the *cabildos* where the *criollos* had a considerable amount of power, and where many local leaders distinctly opposed the *peninsulares* and the Spanish Crown (Morón 1964: 91).

The fact that the Venezuelan revolution was not a popular movement, and that it was the elite who were responsible for leading it says a great deal about the political
situation in the country at this time. As colonization displaced traditional indigenous
government structures and simultaneously created a new, rigid social hierarchy based on
race, the Spanish virtually ignored the interests of the lower classes. The ability of the
elite class to exercise a large amount of power within the colonial system indicated the
foundation of a new political tradition. Those who became elite under the colonial social
hierarchy, and who organized the independence movement in Venezuela were directly
responsible for perpetuating the executive dominance even after independence. The
leaders of the revolution, through their actions, demonstrated that it was not in their own
interests to promote the interests of lower social classes before or during the revolution; if
they had thought them to be pertinent, they would have represented those interests after
decolonization.

Simón Bolívar and Francisco de Miranda were the central leaders in the
revolution. Miranda was a wealthy criollo who held a career in the Spanish Army, and
Bolívar was a wealthy criollo well versed in the ideas of the European Enlightenment.
These criollos refused to recognize the new French King Joseph, who took the throne
after the French invasion of Spain in 1808. A local junta held a cabildo meeting in
Caracas in 1811 to protest the French King, and the junta declared its independence from
Spain. After several months of deliberation, these leaders further announced the
establishment of the Venezuelan Republic, even though Spain did not recognize its
sovereignty until 1821. Instead of the creation of a sovereign, stable government, a series
of military conflicts broke out between those who wanted to create an independent
Venezuelan state, and those who remained loyal to the Spanish Crown. In the end, those
vying for the First Republic of Venezuela succeeded and attempted to establish a new state. The leaders claimed to aim to abolish feudal traditions like the *encomienda* and Indian tributes to the *encomendero*. Miranda assumed leadership of this faction, but repeatedly failed to achieve victory on the battlefield. As a result of his numerous military failures, the first Venezuelan Republic collapsed after only two years (Tarver 2005: 50-51).

Bolívar picked up where Miranda left off in 1816, and the people named him the *Libertador* (Liberator) of the Americas. Under his leadership, *Gran Colombia* emerged in 1819 (it consisted of what is today Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela and Panama), and finally gained independence from Spain in 1821. Bolívar “envisioned a united American continent, and aspired to promote a higher level of well-being, liberty and justice for the people” (Quesada 2001: 82, translation mine). He was an ardent supporter of centralization of power within the national government, because he believed a federalist style government would make for a weak state that could easily disintegrate. While he fought for independence in the name of the American people, his political practices suggested that he did not truly believe the ideals he espoused. On one hand, Bolívar saw liberal democracy as the optimal political system, but on the other hand, he thought Latin America was not ready for such a system. He believed that by imposing a liberal system prematurely it would lead to anarchy and chaos, and therefore he advocated for a single president to rule for life in order to avoid this instability (“Hugo Chávez presents Simón Bolívar” 2009).
As illustrated by the political practices of Bolívar, those who were the elite under the colonial system, and those who organized the independence movement perpetuated the general political system of the colonial era, in which power was centralized in order to exploit and exclude the indigenous. Key leaders like Bolívar recognized that creating an open, inclusive government was not in their interests because it would lead to insurmountable instability, and threaten the very existence of the new state.

Bolívar’s dream of a united American continent never materialized because factions in the independence movement divided the country. Those who held power in *Gran Colombia* disagreed over how they should govern the country, and what the new constitution should guarantee and provide for its citizens; some elites supported a centralized government with a strong presidential figure leading the state, while others wanted a decentralized, federal government. Meanwhile, other politicians suspected Bolívar was attempting to set himself up as dictator and to impose an authoritarian government (“Hugo Chávez presents Simón Bolívar” 2009). As a result of the internal political tensions, Venezuela broke away from *Gran Colombia* and became sovereign in 1831 under the leadership of José Antonio Páez. After 20 years of war and struggles to gain independence, Páez successfully established an independent Venezuela (Tarver 2005: 60).

**Colonial Structures in a Post-Colonial Era**

Since the breakup of *Gran Colombia* in 1830, twenty-seven different constitutions and nearly 72 heads of state have governed Venezuela. Although Páez was provisional president of the newly sovereign state and oversaw peaceful and prosperous years three
separate times while in power (1830-35, 1839-43, 1861-3), this did not ultimately prevent violence from stealing the fragile stability of the government. A civil war between the liberal and conservative parties lasted from 1859-1863, and resulted in the end of Páez’s rule and a victory for the liberal party. Yet this did not signify an end to the political violence, as Venezuela’s leaders continued to use force to gain control of the government for many years. Thus, even though Páez was able to consolidate the republic, Venezuela’s first governments after independence were authoritarian (Tarver 2005: 61-62).

The fact that Venezuela’s political leaders continuously utilized force to gain control of the government, and that the state remained highly unstable because of this political violence provides two important factors in the analysis of Venezuela’s post-colonial development. It was this instability and violence that caused leaders to repress all of those who posed a threat to their regime, i.e., those who did not belong to their identity, in the hopes of stabilizing the system. The leaders additionally aimed to exclude a significant portion of the population, because for them, the fewer actors involved in the political process, the more stable their political system would be. The elite originally adopted this specific dynamic of excluding those who posed a threat to the political system during colonization as a means of maintaining the status quo. This relates to modern political development in that this dynamic became a recurring pattern among modern state leaders.

Scholars refer to the next 100 years after Venezuela’s independence as the “Age of Caudillismo”. Caudillos are charismatic military men who gain the popular support of
the people in order to discredit opposition leaders. They use violence to obtain their power and repressive techniques to retain it. As a consequence of the lack of political consensus after independence, caudillos rebelled against the regime with their military allies, and replaced administrative officials with ones that offered them political support. During this century, the “hegemonic masculinity of caudillismo became a framework of power within which these caudillos either co-opted or repressed working class movements for democracy, independence and autonomy” (Healy 2008: 1-3). Violence and repression under caudillo rule dominated the political scene until the mid-20th century.

The colonial period in Venezuelan history was crucial to state development after independence for the reason that the colonial displacement of traditional indigenous governance structures with a centralized hierarchy led to an extremely dominant executive office in the country. Colonization created new social classes where those who became elite used their nationalistic sentiments to carry out an independence movement with the goal of replacing the peninsulares in the colonial political system. Furthermore, those who led the movement perpetuated the same political traditions after independence that were established during the colonial period. The social and political legacies of colonization did not simply fade out a few decades after decolonization; the executive office continued to dominate Venezuelan national politics, and the colonial social hierarchy remained intact as the country began to evolve into a modern state. In this way, the colonial period remains relevant to modern Venezuelan politics in that post-colonial development was founded on the creation of a dominant executive office with the
objective of perpetuating the exclusion of the native people, or anyone who did not fit into the elite’s collective identity.
CHAPTER V
FROM THE LAST CAUDILLO TO A MODERN VENEZUELAN STATE

Close to a century after independence, authoritarian leaders still controlled Venezuela’s political system, and they utilized violence and other repressive methods to centralize power. Although the “Age of Caudillismo” formally ended in 1935, major factions continued to use force to determine political succession, and did not achieve political stability at the national level until the 1960’s. Many outside observers frequently claimed that Venezuela finally made the necessary transition from authoritarian to democratic rule because of this political stability. Yet the way in which the political parties established this stability in the 1960’s heavily depended on a power-sharing pact between two political parties, and a system of corporatism. Furthermore, elite collective identity, which originated during the colonial period, was embedded in these modern political parties; the elite who founded this new system failed to include the indigenous and poor sectors of society. Thus, these political groups continued to consolidate executive power as a means of marginalizing those they considered to be irrelevant to their political agenda. This new system in the 1960’s only provided a temporary solution, as the same problems the elite suppressed during this time resurfaced to upset the stability a mere forty years later.

Caudillo leadership lasted until the early 20th century, and ended after the rule of Juan Vicente Gómez (1908 to 1935). While there was political repression and torture
during his rule period, there was also economic expansion and liberalization (Tarver 2005: 80). Upon the discovery of vast petroleum reserves in 1914, the country experienced an unprecedented increase in government revenue, and the state began to rely solely on coffee and oil exports to fuel its economy. However, the general Venezuelan public never enjoyed the income these exports generated because of the corruption among government officials. Consequently, there was very little improvement in the standard of living, public health care or education during this time. The Venezuelan public began to show strong disapproval for Gómez, and sought to liberate Venezuela from his dictatorial rule.

When Gómez died in 1935, the end of caudillo rule became a reality; his death signaled the beginning of the country’s transition from dictatorship to a modern state with a corporatist state structure. Political elites permitted the return of revolutionary thinkers who had been exiled by Gómez, making this political transition in Venezuela possible. These progressive leaders formed their political beliefs in exile in other Latin American countries, Europe and the United States, and they were dedicated to transforming the nature of Venezuela’s political system (“The Transition to Democratic Rule” 1990).

The executive cabinet of the Venezuelan government at the time, the Council of Ministers, was quick to elect General Eleazar López Contreras to fill the presidency. He governed for six years (1935-1941), and initiated significant reforms in the political system during his term. Realizing that his survival depended on an opening for some civilian political expression, Contreras implemented small reforms to liberalize the state. For example, he permitted the organization of various political parties, including
Movimiento de Organización Venezolana (ORVE), the Partido Democrático Nacional (which eventually became Acción Democrática) and the Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente (COPEI). Moreover, his administration exhibited a greater sensitivity towards protests and uprisings, acknowledging the citizens’ grievances rather than repressing them outright. Contreras additionally supported petroleum exports, and used the revenues they created to promote a liberal economy (Tarver 2005: 86).

The Venezuelan National Congress (officially assembled at the time of Venezuelan independence by Simón Bolívar, but later elected by landowners and soldiers) selected General Isaías Medina Angarita to take Contreras’ position in 1941 (Bushnell 1954: 10, 13-14). When Angarita came to power, Venezuela had “socially indoctrinated and structured political parties, an economy based on the petroleum industry and social advances in the areas of health and education” (Tarver 2005: 89). Angarita devised several programs in which he attempted to transform the political arena into one of tolerance. For instance, he initiated reforms in the areas of income taxation, social security and agrarian reform (Tarver 2005: 89). Even though the Venezuelan state experienced social and economic progress and reform under Angarita, the executive office maintained its control over national political affairs, continuing to use its dominance to repress those who were not pertinent to its agenda. Furthermore, the government remained corrupt and lacked transparency; it was still the main benefactor of the massive oil revenues. Thus, despite economic progress and because of such large-scale corruption, Angarita lacked the popular support of the people (Tarver 2005: 92).
In 1945, Acción Democrática (AD) and Unión Patriótica Militar (UPM) staged a coup d’état, which subsequently incited a gradual transition to the political system that governed the country until 1999. Rómulo Betancourt, the organizer of the coup, believed the overthrow was necessary in order to overhaul the severely corrupt system Angarita maintained, and that otherwise, the country had little chance of making a democratic transition. Regardless of his long term objectives, Betancourt’s coup was an undemocratic action, and therefore it was no more than a continuation of the political practices that characterized the century of caudillo leadership (“The Transition to Democratic Rule” 1990).

Betancourt’s coup d’état is important in that his actions were in keeping with the political dynamic introduced to the Venezuelan elite during the independence movement. Because Angarita repressed all other political factions in a way that would make it impossible for them to gain access to the system, Betancourt used violence to usurp power within the state. In doing so, he demonstrated that the same dynamic that appeared directly after decolonization was not only still present in the country, but that it was also still relevant to the political culture of the elite. Furthermore, despite his initial intentions, Betancourt was a member of the elite social class that believed it knew what was right for the country and was not afraid to use violence to obtain its goals.

After the reforms enacted under Betancourt’s administration, the government granted universal suffrage to all people regardless of gender, legalized all political parties and used proportional representation to determine the composition of Congress. Even though Betancourt laid the foundation for a free and fair election, major factions within
the state did not respect the outcome of the election in 1948. At the time, Acción Democrática was the most significant element of power in the state except the church and the military. When AD broke its alliance with the armed forces, the military drew on its power to overthrow Rómulo Gallegos, the AD candidate and the first democratically elected president of Venezuela. Carlos Delgado Chalbaud replaced Gallegos shortly after his overthrow. Yet just five years after this coup, Marcos Pérez Jiménez overthrew Delgado, signifying that the changes Betancourt attempted to generate in the political system were futile. From 1948 to 1958 Venezuela experienced authoritarian rule once again; first under Delgado and then under Jiménez (Tarver 2005: 93).

In addition to excluding the opposition and marginalized voices, both Delgado and Jiménez used authoritarian tactics to centralize executive power. Since AD was politically opposed to both Delgado and Jiménez, the dictatorial regimes of these men suppressed the members of the party; they sent many opponents to prison where they faced torture and starvation. Similarly, they often had to shut down college campuses when students refused to stop rioting against the regime. Jiménez came to power through a coup against Delgado, and maintained his power by rigging elections. During his reign, Jiménez reformed the executive office in that the office gained a significant amount of power over state affairs. For instance, the state adopted a new constitution in 1953 that gave the president the power to appoint governors. The constitution also allowed the president to take “whatever measures necessary” to preserve the security of the nation and to maintain social order. While there was intense opposition to his reforms, the
National Police played a key role in suppressing any resistance to Jiménez’s changes in the government (Tarver 2005: 96-97).

Delgado and Pérez successfully overthrew or silenced the political actors who insisted on democratic change for Venezuela, which suggests that the dominant classes were not interested in an open, inclusive government. This is significant in that the political system exhibited the same characteristics as those that defined it during colonization: the politically marginalized stepped up to challenge a new regime as soon as it appeared, prompting the use of the same violent tactics to prevent a change in the status quo. This aforementioned political dynamic is also important in that the elite were using violence not only to prevent political change, but also a change in the social hierarchy. The elite class still did not identify with the indigenous and poor sectors of society; the elite and the indigenous had fundamentally contradictory political goals, and the elite continued to view lower social classes as inferior. Therefore, those in control of the system employed these differences to justify the exclusion of the lower social classes.

Although his administration was outrageously oppressive, Jiménez did bring economic progress to the country. He was able to invest in the country’s communication and transportation infrastructure, urban construction projects and defense expenditure due to the fact that Venezuela still received immense revenues from petroleum exports. Yet he did so “at the expense of the political process;” the state did little to expand human resources, healthcare or education, as corrupt politicians squandered millions of dollars from the Venezuelan treasury (Tarver 2005: 98). The political situation was not helped by the fact that Western democracies at this time actively supported anti-communist
regimes. Many democratic countries supported the Venezuelan political system even though it was highly oppressive. Nonetheless, after ten additional years of dictatorial rule, Venezuelan politicians finally came to a consensus (Tarver 2005: 98).

Politicians, military men and the Venezuelan public alike were conscious of the violence that characterized the political scene in their country for over a century. Immediately after the coup ousting Jiménez in 1958, the leaders of AD, COPEI and *Unión Republicana Democrática* (URD) signed the Pact of *Punto Fijo*; the government began to negotiate a way of alternating political power between the different parties so as to facilitate peace while simultaneously inhibiting those who threatened it. This alternation of power is known as a “power-sharing pact,” which is generally “designed to create stability by constitutionally dividing political power among major groups” (Handelman 2011: 119).

In the Pact of *Punto Fijo*, the three main political parties pledged to support the winner of presidential elections, and to establish a unified government in which the three signatories would have equal representation in the executive branch, regardless of the electoral outcome (Tarver 2005: 101-2). In this way, AD, COPEI and URD forged stability by forming a closed political system that excluded all other political parties, but incorporated the pertinent economic, business and labor interest groups into the decision-making process (“El puntofijísimo” 2000). It is also important to note that the incorporation of the indigenous and poor sectors of society was absent from their agenda. Thus, Venezuelan elites arrived at this reciprocal agreement, because for them, the fewer actors that participated in the political process, the more stability the government would
have in the meantime. While this particular pact itself only lasted until 1960, the tradition of political dialogue between the principal party elites became an ingrained aspect of Venezuelan political culture (“El puntofijísimo” 2000).

The Pact of Punto Fijo was a significant event in the political development of Venezuela in that the elite, although basing their political system on consensus between parties to create stability and eliminate violence, never actually opened the government. Likewise, the pact never allowed the legislative and judicial branches to balance out or “check” executive power. For this reason, the elite perpetuated the exclusive system based on the same form of executive dominance that first appeared during the colonial period. Although Venezuela had progressed politically, the executive office still dominated the political agenda of the country by determining which sectors of society had access to the government.

In addition, the elite who launched the Pact of Punto Fijo produced a modern constitution that actually augmented the powers of the executive office. The Constitution of 1961 was the twenty-fifth and longest lasting constitution in Venezuelan history. This Constitution, which was based on the Pact of Punto Fijo, designed government institutions that would support consensus building within a small group of elites, and among national party leaders and corporate groups. By doing so, Venezuelan leaders established a highly centralized state. Furthermore, by structuring the government to distribute oil revenues among different government programs in a way that advanced society, the politicians created a modern, stable Venezuelan state (Monaldi 2008: 373).
With the 1961 Constitution, the elite succeeded in “generating consensus and stability amongst themselves, while simultaneously institutionalizing actors, practices and policies by insulating the government from pressures of change” (Crisp 2000: 10). The Constitution granted executive power to the president provided that he/she came to power through direct, universal elections, and that he/she held the term for no longer than five years. The president had to uphold the principles of the constitution and the laws; he could elect and dismiss ministers, national employees and federal and local governors; he was the supreme leader of the military forces; he could totally or partially regulate laws after they had been passed, as long as the intention of the law remained unaltered; he could issue various types of decrees under emergency situations; and he could supervise Congress, either personally or through the use of a minister. Even though the Constitution had provisions that delegated power to the legislative and judicial branches, it was the executive branch that exercised the majority of the power in practice, specifically the president. However, the president’s ability to pass legislation and set the agenda in Congress depended on his strong personality (“Venezuela” 2011).

It is the president’s ability to initiate legislation that has afforded him a great deal of power in Venezuela. Even though the legislative branch is usually in charge of initiating the majority of laws in a presidential system, in Venezuela, the executive branch has historically been responsible for an overwhelming majority of the legislation initiated in Congress. For example, the presidents could draft and introduce legislation to the Congress, and had several forms of decree authority. In practice, the executive branch is where policy making occurred, and therefore lobbying the legislative branch as a
means of influencing policy decisions was ineffective. This is problematic in that officials of the executive branch are even less accountable to the voters than are legislative officials; the only elected official of the executive branch is the president (Crisp 2000: 10-11).

Given the frequent use of his decree authority, and thereby domination of the legislative agenda, the president could wield broad powers with only minimal checks and balances (Crisp 2000: 11). For instance, Venezuelan presidents initiated 84% of the legislation from 1961 to 1995; the president with the highest passage rate was Jaime Lusinchi in the 1980’s who initiated 90% of the legislation passed (Crisp 2000: 73). Additionally during this time period, the presidents overall authorized 194 decrees related to economic rights. They used them to regulate a broad range of issues including, but not limited to, consumer prices, interest rates, exchange rates and the level of unemployment. President Carlos Andrés Pérez issued the highest number of decrees in the late 1970’s, with a total of 95 (Crisp 2000: 90).

Historically, the vast majority of Venezuelan political leaders were military men. Politicians broke this strong tradition in 1958 when the government began to transition from military to civilian rule. Although power passed peacefully between the different political leaders, the general dynamic of the Venezuelan government had not changed since decolonization. Violence and force were no longer central elements of deciding presidential succession, and military dictators did not govern the country, but this neither secured its status as a consolidated democracy. Important participatory avenues of the political system remained closed to many of those who wanted access, and the
government continued to use executive power to marginalize the indigenous and poor sectors of society. These characteristics are significant to Venezuelan political development in that they are the legacies of the colonial period that persisted into the late 1990’s.

In a consolidated democracy, civil society’s ability to participate and influence government decisions is critical; despite various reforms in Venezuela, this remained structurally prohibited. As the majority of oil revenue went to the state, the business and labor groups then lobbied the executive branch to determine how the state spent those funds between the public sector, business and labor. In return for the interest groups’ political support, the executive office collected the oil revenues and supplied the business and labor sectors with compensation in the form of direct investment, below-market interest rates, preferential exchange rates and debt forgiveness. Since the executive was primarily concerned with catering to these particular sectors, they were the only groups that could influence the creation of legislation. The two most powerful groups were the Confederation of Venezuelan Workers (CTV), for labor, and the Venezuelan Federation of Chambers and Commerce (Fedecámaras), for business (Crisp 2000: 12-13).

Although AD and COPEI politicians intermittently directed CTV, AD was always the leading political force within the interest group, as AD militants first organized it (“Interest Groups” 1990). CTV’s most powerful affiliate was Fedepetrol, the largest oil workers union; because of this, Fedepetrol held a privileged position in the government. Fedecámaras represented twelve main industry sectors in Venezuela: banking, agriculture, commerce, construction, energy, manufacturing, media, mining, ranching,
insurance, transportation and tourism (“Venezuela: Politics and History” 2006). In respect to these specific sectors, Fedecámaras was very influential in that it had the ability to set wages and working conditions, and it generally enforced and maintained this power through management led strikes. As a consequence, CTV and Fedecámaras were both accustomed to a large degree of independence from state intervention (Coker 2002: 154).

Fedecámaras and CTV’s ability to influence executive decisions was due to its direct access to the power of the executive through advisory commissions. Venezuelan presidents utilized these commissions to acquire information or advice on certain policy areas or specific issues of interest. Commissions effectively institutionalized consultation between the government and private interests. Moreover, through the control of the Venezuelan policy-making structure, the government kept certain issues and certain political actors off the agenda and out of national politics (Crisp 2000: 98). While advisory commissions granted access to the executive branch for some interest groups, they were still not as inclusive as they perhaps seemed. For example, the advisory commissions comprised of approximately 60% government officials, 31% economic groups and 6% non-economic representatives (Crisp 2000: 107). Furthermore, the majority of the people serving on these committees were not only government officials, but also handpicked by the President. The advisory commissions were supposed to represent the interests of Venezuelan citizens, yet most representatives were bureaucratic officials, and consequently held no accountability to a constituency. Therefore, the commissions only represented and benefited the interests of AD, COPEI, Fedecámaras
and CTV; from 1959 to 1999 these were the only groups that had access to Venezuela’s political system (Crisp 2000: 98-100).

Again, corporatism is a “socio-political system organized on the basis of functional groups rather than individualism; it tends to be top-down, anti-pluralist and authoritarian, and is used as a mechanism for controlling change and keeping interest groups in line” (Grayson 1998: xi). Venezuela established a corporatist system in that it successfully incorporated two interest groups into the state, CTV and Fedecámaras, which basically made them the only effective groups at influencing the legislative process. The Pact of Punto Fijo, the Constitution of 1961 and the political practices of Venezuelan elite laid the groundwork for this type of political system that involved power-sharing as well as corporatism.

The ability of the elite to develop a system of power-sharing and corporatism confirms that those who became elite under the colonial social hierarchy were still perpetuating this executive dominance in the modern Venezuelan political system because it was not in their interest to create an inclusive government. Moreover, it illustrates that while Venezuela has not remained a static political entity, the executive branch was just as capable of controlling national politics as it was directly after decolonization. These aspects of the Venezuelan government are key to understanding how colonization affected its development, as well as the dynamics of the current political situation, because both were integral features of the system until the late 1990’s.

The economic crisis in the 1980’s threatened to topple the Punto Fijo system; state leaders desperately tried to reconcile the political and social unrest the crisis instigated.
In the 1980’s, there was a sharp drop in international oil prices. At that time, Venezuela was the world’s third largest exporter of oil, and continued to be extremely dependent on oil revenues to keep the country running smoothly. The drop in prices injured the Venezuelan economy in that it significantly decreased government revenues. Interest groups like Fedecámaras and CTV, which received significant portions of these revenues, became discontent with the administration. Since the government established institutions in such a way that the state would directly benefit from the oil revenues, the crisis primarily affected the government in an adverse way; the stability of the Punto Fijo system began to unravel. Under this system, government institutions allowed the elite to benefit at the expense of the masses. For instance, Venezuela experienced a growing disparity in income distribution, and social indicators, such as education and illiteracy, poverty levels, medical care and transportation, were lower than expected for an economy of its size. Although Venezuela’s highly inequitable income distribution and low social indicators relative to the size of its economy were not new characteristics of the Venezuelan state, the corrupt nature of the Punto Fijo system exacerbated these conditions. In addition to these factors, the oil crisis in the 1980’s brought economic instability and subsequently high levels of political instability and social unrest throughout the country (“Petroleum” 1990).

The Pact of Punto Fijo aimed to create stability rather than a true democracy, and as a result, the political system suffered from many deficiencies and weaknesses. One structural weakness was the elite’s inability to diversify the country’s exports. A second was the purely elite and rigid system of representation of interest groups at the national
level, which did not allow the majority of the Venezuelan population to fully participate in political affairs. These administrative weaknesses became apparent when the country experienced economic crisis. While the politicians who developed the pact expected to foster a sense of legitimacy within the system, they failed. They did not establish a popular, legitimate government in the long run, and these weaknesses and democratic deficiencies led to Hugo Chávez’s coup d’état in 1992 (Philip 2004: 152).

Although his coup was unsuccessful in 1992, it catapulted Chávez onto Venezuela’s national political stage. The public viewed him as a man prepared to take severe measures in order to challenge the Punto Fijo establishment, which by 1992, the majority of the public “considered corrupt, inefficient and the domain of the privileged elite” (Rosen 2000: 15). Chávez felt this coup was necessary in that the power-sharing agreement between AD and COPEI exemplified an arrangement based on monopolizing power and keeping new actors on the margins of the political system. The country’s tremendous oil revenues assured AD and COPEI’s power to enrich their own political parties and the interest groups integrated in the corporatist state system, while the rest of Venezuela suffered from declining living standards. Under this arrangement, many groups of society were marginalized; according to one study the Catholic University in Caracas conducted in 1997, 67% of Venezuelans earned less than two dollars a day, while 36% earned less than one dollar a day, percentages that increased from 35% and 13% since 1975, respectively (Rosen 2000: 15). It was this exceptionally highly level of poverty accompanied by an extreme amount of corruption that fueled Chávez’s military campaign.
Rather than squandering the country’s oil wealth, Chávez thought the state should use it to transform and uplift society. After his failed coup and two years in detention, he was released and began to organize his presidential campaign, promising to improve living standards for more than 80% of the population (Rosen 2000: 16). The marginalized and repressed sectors of society blamed AD and COPEI for the deep socio-economic crisis that plagued Venezuela during the 1980’s and 1990’s, and could identify with Chávez’s working-class roots, his desire to incorporate excluded sectors in national development and his strong sense of nationalism. Chávez made a point of reiterating that he “did not have obligations to anyone but the people” (López-Maya 2000: 23-5).

Despite the fact that Chávez’s attempt to overthrow the government in 1992 was an aggressive, undemocratic action, he actually enjoyed a considerable amount of civilian support, and the people democratically elected him in 1998 (Philip 2004: 150). While political exclusion worked in the short run to create a relatively stable and peaceful political environment, the coup of 1992 demonstrates how the lack of inclusiveness in political affairs eventually fostered an unstable system with strong opposition in the long run. All of the sectors of society the government repressed during that time period clamored for political inclusion. This makes Chávez’s coup particularly relevant to this study for two reasons: (1) it symbolized the continuation of a political practice that characterized the “Age of Caudillismo”, and (2) it allowed Chávez to eventually gain access to and control of the political system, making him the first member of society who did not belong to AD, COPEI, CTV or Fedecámaras to do so since the creation of the system.
Summary and Conclusion

As Venezuela passed from being an independent region with thousands of indigenous groups to a Spanish colony, the state underwent a drastic transformation. Prior to colonization, indigenous civilizations organized themselves into chiefdoms, and the people shared the land with one another as equals. During the colonial period, the Spaniards forced a highly centralized regime onto the indigenous population, destroying their political and social organization. The Spaniards considered their culture and way of life superior to that of the indigenous’, which they deemed backward, barbaric and primitive; as a result, the colonizers viewed the indigenous as “the others”. The colonizers created new laws, a centralized political administration and an economic system that kept the European elite in power; they forced the indigenous into submissive positions politically and socially.

During colonization, the Spanish Crown did not permit the criollos to hold important offices in the colonial administration, and this was one central cause of the independence movement. A second cause involved the colonizers’ elite identity. Their identity, which they derived from their European heritage and strong connection to the American land, ultimately precipitated the marginalization of the indigenous population after decolonization. Likewise, the leaders at the time of Venezuelan independence, like Bolívar and Miranda, did not want to establish a democratic government; doing so, would have compelled them to open the political system and share power. The criollos used their wealth and power to keep the colonial system intact. Therefore, colonialism dismantled the indigenous social hierarchy and supplanted it with one in which the
Europeans excluded and marginalized the natives. As a consequence, post-colonial development was founded on the creation of a dominant executive office with the objective of perpetuating the exclusion of the indigenous, as well as those “others” below them in the social hierarchy.

Never having sufficiently governed the political administration during colonial rule, the criollos lacked the experience needed to take over the political system after independence, yet did so anyway. The new system was very weak in that the leaders did not have legitimacy, and ambitious caudillos looking to usurp power easily overthrew them. However, although caudillos lacked experience with governance, they were militarily trained, and thus maintained their power through the use of force and other repressive techniques.

Even today, the same social classes that topped the socio-political hierarchy during colonialism retain a considerable amount of power within the system, while those oppressed under colonialism largely continue to be marginalized. Furthermore, Venezuela did not achieve a peaceful transition in power among political leaders until the mid-20th century; this was only possible because of a power-sharing pact between two prominent political parties at the time. These parties established political stability for nearly 40 years, but the limited nature of the system brought opposition from many sectors of Venezuelan society, and increasingly so after the oil crisis in the 1980’s.

While on the surface the political system the elite created in 1958 appeared democratic because there were regular elections with peaceful transitions of power between two political parties, the exclusivity of the system made it similar in nature to the
Firstly, there was a centralization of power concentrated in the executive branch, with the president proposing the vast majority of legislation. Secondly, very few interest groups could realistically participate in or had access to the government. Finally, advisory commissions directed the executive branch on proposed legislation; however, the president selected the majority of the officials who sat on the commissions. The fact that the public generally supported Chávez’s coup suggests that the people were not happy with the established political system.

Venezuela spent over 450 years under colonial occupation and oppressive caudillo rule. Considering the span of Venezuelan history from pre-colonial indigenous chiefdoms until the present day government of Chávez, the Punto Fijo system lasted a relatively small period of time (1958-1999). Both the colonial administration and the century of caudillo rule were in place ten times as long as the government set up under the Pact of Punto Fijo and the Constitution of 1961. Not only did the Punto Fijo system last a relatively short period of time, but it was also a highly centralized system that was not as democratic in practice as it appeared to be in theory. Venezuela’s current political administration has not been able to drop the legacy of colonialism, i.e., the political culture of a strong executive office with the president’s ability to pursue a personalized agenda. Thus, Venezuela’s current political institutions have not changed in essence since the colonial period in that the government still manipulates the power of the executive office in order to exclude the interests of those groups that are not pertinent to the executive agenda. It is important to note that although Chávez has made an effort to open the political system for formerly marginalized voices at the national level, this has not
resulted in any significant deviation from Venezuela’s political culture or the elite’s attitude towards lower social classes, as will be explored in the concluding chapter.
CHAPTER VI

POINTS OF CONVERGENCE AND DEPARTURE

While the colonization of Latin America most certainly impacted the political
development of numerous countries after their independence, it is more difficult to
pinpoint exactly in what way and to what degree the colonial period altered the course of
this development. Despite acquiring disparate levels of political organization before the
colonial period, Mexico and Venezuela have striking similarities in the paths of their
development and in the qualities of their political systems after experiencing colonial
rule. This chapter reviews the parallels and contrasts during the three major periods
discussed in previous chapters: the pre-colonial, colonial, and contemporary periods. It
will specifically detail the ways in which colonization played a key role in the
development of a new political identity for the criollos, and how this in turn produced
major political factions post-independence. It will also explain how the elite in both
countries eventually realized institutional outcomes that were not identical, yet that
served the same purpose. Special attention will also be given to current political
developments in Mexico and Venezuela, as both countries have experienced significant
political transitions and reforms at the national level since the 1990’s.

Divergent Indigenous Societies and Governance Structures

In Mexico, key indigenous populations like the Olmecs and the Mayans
contributed to the evolution of civilizations until the Aztec society became the powerfully
dominant empire in the region. Under the Aztec empire, the social hierarchy was organized in a way such that the wealthy elite and religious leaders ruled the land, soldiers played an important role in the expansion of the empire, commoners wore special clothing to denote their low status, and slaves, although possessing the lowest social status in Aztec society, could buy their freedom. At the local level of governance, calpullís were the basic unit of political organization; they were organized based on familial relations and members owned the land communally. Overall, Mexican indigenous civilizations were stratified, militaristic and centralized, with religion being an integral part of everyday life.

Venezuela’s indigenous civilizations were starkly different, in part because they were not nearly as advanced as their Mexican counterpart. In contrast, the country’s indigenous population was very small, had a basic, decentralized political organization with no major governing authorities, and was semi-nomadic with a reliance on agriculture and hunting and gathering. The population was organized into chiefdoms based on familial relations where the people considered themselves equals and used the land and other natural resources communally; the individual chiefdoms were loosely affiliated with no overarching collective identity. Furthermore, indigenous societies were not as stratified as Aztec society; although chief artisans were the nobility and farmers, fishers and laborers made up the lower class, there was no rigid division between the two.

While there are specific notable differences between Mexican and Venezuelan indigenous societies with regards to the level of political organization that each achieved, neither reached the complexity of political development seen in European countries
during the same time period. Moreover, indigenous communities in both regions shared elements that set them apart from the social and political hierarchy the colonizers forced them to adopt. For example, although the indigenous had established social hierarchies, they were exceedingly more flexible than the colonial social hierarchy; in Aztec society, military men could earn land and nobility by serving the empire, slavery was not hereditary and slaves could buy their freedom through the repayment of their debts. In addition to increased social mobility on a local level, both Mexican and Venezuelan indigenous populations utilized the land communally; there was a weak concept of land ownership in that the indigenous did not view the land as a commodity that could be bought, owned and sold with money.

**The Mode of Spanish Colonization and the Founding of a New Identity**

The colonization of Mexico took priority over that of Venezuela because of Mexico’s abundance of mineral wealth. However, Venezuela was not discarded as a colony because it still provided the Spanish empire with a coastline for commerce and rich agricultural lands. Nonetheless, in both countries colonial occupation shattered the indigenous social hierarchy, their concept of land ownership and their political organization. Moreover, the colonial socio-political hierarchy established in both countries proved to be considerably more rigid than that of the indigenous societies. Spanish colonial institutions were centralized, exclusive and lacked judiciary and legislative branches, making the executive office’s power virtually absolute.

The replacement of indigenous governance structures with colonial institutions, while a defining event that heavily influenced post-colonial political development, should
not overshadow the significance of the evolution of a new collective identity in both Mexico and Venezuela. The elite developed this collective identity based on skin color, language, and a pure European heritage; it facilitated the rigid colonial hierarchy, and high levels of racial mixing exacerbated the socio-political status of the minorities. The *peninsulares* and the *criollos* could not readily identify with the indigenous, and therefore constructed a dichotomy in which the indigenous symbolized everything that the Spaniards were not. They perceived the indigenous as being savage, pagan, uneducated and primitive, whereas the Spanish symbolized enlightenment, reason, truth and modernity. Consequently, the mestizos, mulattos, the indigenous and the Africans were seen as “the others.” Only those who belonged to the elite collective identity could participate in the political system, thus an extremely small percentage of the colonial population held power in the administration.

However, toward the end of the colonial period, the *peninsulares* and *criollos*’ collective identities began to diverge. Under the Bourbon Reforms, the Spanish established higher standards for those who could hold administrative positions, and the *criollos* no longer met that standard. Consequently, the *criollos*’ new identity was partly based on this political and social exclusion, yet it was also based on a common sense of nationalism for their native land. While the Spanish born colonizers were quick to find fault with the culture and native inhabitants of the Americas, the *criollos*, being American born, felt a connection with the American land, and believed that if they could break away from Spain they would be able to employ America’s abundant resources to successfully create independent states.
It is important to note that while Mexico and Venezuela’s indigenous societies were very different, both countries had the same political institutions and social hierarchies during the colonial period. It was largely the colonial created population of *criollos* who carried out the independence movements, and who were responsible for setting up new state institutions when the colonizers departed. In Mexico and Venezuela the *criollos’* collective identity served as a cohesive force during the independence movements, yet in the aftermath of decolonization, the elite class quickly became divided over which political system the country should adopt. As a result, this caused critical factions among the elite in the post-colonial states, as well as a great deal of political instability.

**Political Factions, the Elite and their Role in State Formation**

Interestingly, although their political development before and after colonization still occurred completely independent of one another, Mexico and Venezuela have striking parallels in their paths of political development after decolonization. Similar to Mexico and Venezuela was that no matter what the elite leaders intended to do during the fight for independence, the first governments put in place after decolonization were authoritarian. Likewise, both countries experienced a significant amount of time under *caudillo* rule where the only effective branch of government was the executive. Eventually, political violence prompted a need for consensus and a peaceful way of determining presidential successors. Common to Mexico and Venezuela, the elite who led the government played a paramount role in the formation of their respective states.
In Mexico, the dynamic of *caudillo* rule with power centralized in the executive office lasted close to a century before insurmountable pressure from the lower class threatened to topple the establishment. The repression, inequalities among social classes, and corruption of government officials spilled over from the colonial period, and the new Mexican elite made little real effort to squelch these practices after independence. It was in 1910 that a revolution shook the political scene; the marginalized sectors of Mexican society that the colonizers pushed to the bottom of the socio-political hierarchy demanded that the government take their interests into consideration.

Out of this revolution came two main factions: the Constitutionalists and the Conventionists. The Constitutionalists fought to maintain the political system that had been in place since decolonization, while the Conventionists fought for the poor, marginalized sectors of society that experienced land appropriation and intense discrimination at the hands of the government. In the end, the Constitutionalists won, which signified the continuation of the political practices present since the colonial period. Shortly after the revolution, official political parties organized, which not only institutionalized the factions from the revolution, but also secured the dominant role of the executive office and the repression of minority voices through the political practices adopted by the PRI for another 71 years.

At the same time, even though independence leaders like Bolívar initially endeavored to instate a representative government after decolonization, Venezuela was consumed by the same dynamic that characterized Mexico’s government (*caudillo* rule with centralized and absolute power in the executive office) shortly after independence.
Like the situation in Mexico, the elite made little real effort after decolonization to create an open political system that included the marginalized voices in society. Also similar to Mexico was the fact that political violence often threatened to steal the fragile stability of the government administration. Although there was never specifically a major revolution like there had been in Mexico, the main factions in Venezuela vying for power eventually evolved into modern political parties in the 1940’s.

In Mexico, the elite put an end to the violence through the creation of the PRI, and in the same way that the Venezuelan elite forged peace through a power sharing pact. While these methods of generating peace are fundamentally different, they accomplished the same outcome. AD and COPEI signed the Pact of Punto Fijo in 1958 and established their own constitution in 1961; the former made it practically impossible for other political parties to effectively participate in national politics, and the latter severely enhanced the power of the executive office. Therefore, while Mexico and Venezuela used different methods to achieve a stable political system, it resulted in the same outcome: closed government institutions that were absolutely unresponsive to the interests of the Mexican and Venezuelan populations, namely the indigenous and those belonging to lower social classes.

Another important parallel in the histories of Mexico and Venezuela was that Venezuela eventually experienced a political upheaval similar in nature to Mexico’s 1910 Revolution. Hugo Chávez’s coup d’état in the 1990’s, although it failed, was a type of revolution in that Chávez aimed to overthrow a corrupt political system that perpetuated the same inequalities in society that first appeared during colonization. Chávez did come
to power through a democratic election, but it was his attempted coup that mobilized the citizens to believe that change within their political system was possible. This is similar in nature to Mexico’s 1910 Revolution in the sense that Zapata aimed to overthrow Díaz’s corrupt regime because the government had done little to reduce the social, economic and political disparities that resulted from Spain’s colonial occupation. Neither AD nor COPEI addressed the interests of the poor, indigenous population first forced into a lower social status during colonization, which motivated Chávez to demand a government responsive to the needs of these sectors in society.

Until recently in Mexico and Venezuela, a few political parties, labor and business organizations were the dominant actors who participated at the national level. The election of Vicente Fox in Mexico in 2000 and the election of Chávez in Venezuela in 1998 altered the course of political development for both of these countries in important ways. In Mexico this signified a break with the PRI’s corporate state structure that had been in place for 71 years, and in Venezuela this indicated the possibility for major political change at the national level.

**Mexico and Venezuela as Contemporary States**

The 2000 and 2006 presidential elections in Mexico were landmark events for many. At the time of the 2006 elections, many experts claimed that the “political situation had changed,” and that the “young democracy in Mexico looked much older than its age” (“On a Peaceful Election Day Across Mexico” 2006). However, despite the fact that Felipe Calderón became the second president elected from the PAN in 2006, it was a highly contested election; Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Calderón’s opposition from
the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), accused the PAN of manipulating votes and tally sheets, and many citizens expressed their concerns that “something went awry” during the balloting (“Recounting our way to Democracy” 2006). Nevertheless, citizens still turned out in large numbers to vote in Mexico’s state and local elections in 2010 as the country’s drug lords attempted to disrupt the process. On the morning of the elections, drug lords bombed offices, threatened and killed candidates and hung bodies in public places. In spite of the chaos, soldiers guarded many polling places to keep the drug lords from further threatening the democratic process (“Mexican Democracy, Even Under Siege” 2010).

This transition from a single party system can be attributed, in part, to the reforms President José López Portillo undertook during his administration from 1976-1982; his reforms included changes in the structure of Congress and the registration of political parties. The reforms progressed over the years in a way such that the number of seats in the Chamber of Deputies eventually increased from 200 to 500, 200 of which are elected by proportional representation, and no party is permitted more than 60% of the seats. At the same time, the Senate doubled in size to 128 seats, 32 of which are elected by proportional representation. As for the registration of political parties, so long as a political party earns 1.5% of the national vote for three consecutive elections, the government will recognize the party as “permanently registered.” Under these laws, the state “enhanced the abilities of smaller opposition groups to participate in elections and to take seats in Congress. Congressional representation thereby expanded” (“Electoral Reform in Mexico's Hegemonic Party System” 1997).
This transition can additionally be attributed to the reforms of Carlos Salinas who held office from 1988-1994. Under his administration, the state formally established the Federal Electoral Institute in 1990 which is an autonomous, public organization “directly responsible for all of the activities concerning the preparation, organization, conduction and surveillance of the federal electoral processes” (“IFE: Nature and Attributions” 2009). This institution is extremely important to the international community’s perception of a democratic transition in Mexico in that, as of 1996 and 2007 respectively, it has been completely disassociated with the executive branch in its functions, and it has gained the enhanced powers of oversight and control of the funding of political parties and electoral campaigns (“IFE: Nature and Attributions” 2009). As a consequence of the increased participation of a variety of political parties at the national level and a more transparent election process, many outside observers view Mexico as being a more democratic country today.

In Venezuela, Hugo Chávez was democratically elected, yet quickly made polemical changes to the political system. For instance, he replaced the 1961 Constitution with a new one in 1999 that significantly augmented the powers of the president. Chávez stripped the opposition controlled Congress of its powers by instituting a Constitutional Assembly, transferring Congress’ powers to this new body. This decree the president made in 1999 did not formally dissolve the Congress, yet it had the same effect. Chávez declared a “legislative emergency” which gave him the ability to create this Assembly, and subsequently unlimited powers through the creation of a new Constitution (“Venezuelan Congress Stripped of Its Last Remaining Powers” 1999).
Furthermore, after his re-election in 2006, he proposed the removal of term limits on the presidency, nationalized electrical companies and many oil projects and withdrew from the International Monetary Fund (“Hugo Chávez” 2010). Despite Chávez’s claims that he “needed a new Constitution to carry out a peaceful social revolution and to end rampant corruption,” it seems as though he is using this Constitution to wield more power in that his followers dominate the Supreme Court, the National Assembly (the new unicameral Congress instated under Chávez), the federal bureaucracy and many state companies. In light of the 2008 economic crisis, Chávez even resorted to using tactics like secret police raids, expropriations of private businesses and jailing of political opponents (“Hugo Chávez” 2010).

Although sweeping institutional reform took place at the national level, indigenous communities have experienced few instances of success when pursuing their interests. In recent years in Mexico and Venezuela, the indigenous communities have unrelentingly persevered in their struggle to gain more access to and concessions from the government. For example, in Mexico in 1994 the guerrilla organization known as the Zapatista Army of National Liberation “began a military offensive against the government of Mexico in Chiapas.” The rebel army “demanded land reform for the indigenous of Chiapas and the protection of their civil liberties and democratic rights” (Mazzei 2009: 25). Despite their efforts, the uprising lasted only for a few days, but importantly ended in the Mexican government’s agreement to initiate a dialogue with the rebel group. The result of this dialogue process was the San Andrés Accords of 1996 which centered on “basic respect for the diversity of the indigenous population of
Chiapas; the conservation of the natural resources within the territories used and occupied by indigenous peoples; a greater participation of indigenous communities in the decisions and control of public expenditures; the participation of indigenous communities in determining their own development plans, as well as having control over their own administrative and judicial affairs; and the autonomy of indigenous communities and their right of free determination in the framework of the state” (“The San Andrés Accords” 2007).

These accords laid the groundwork for the Indigenous Bill of Rights in 2000, a proposed amendment to the Mexican Constitution. However, while the rebels hoped these accords would bring substantial change, “after Congress finished the bill, it scarcely looked like what the rebels had envisioned” (“Welcome Back to the Jungle” 2001). Ironically, Mexico began to transition to a more representative style of government as early as 1977, and meaningful concessions have yet to be made for the indigenous sectors of society at the national level today. In spite of the fact that Mexico’s government became more inclusive, the executive office still retains a significant amount of power to the point that it can control which sectors of society are represented at the national level.

As for indigenous access to the government in Venezuela, Chávez signed an accord promising that the government would respect the rights of the indigenous communities in 2000 (“Assessment for Indigenous Peoples in Venezuela” 2006). Under the Guaicaipuro Mission in 2003, the government formally recognized indigenous land rights, culture, resource control and access to basic public services. Chávez additionally designated three seats in the National Assembly and one governorship for indigenous
politicians under the new Constitution (“The Promise of Restitution of Indigenous Rights in Venezuela” 2004). Furthermore, the National Indian Council of Venezuela (CONIVE) represents the interests of 23 indigenous ethnic groups, and lobbies the government in order to preserve their lands and rights. Even with these concessions, Chávez has not entirely integrated the indigenous people into the political system (“Assessment for Indigenous Peoples in Venezuela” 2006).

Regardless of the protection of the indigenous on the part of the Venezuelan government, gold, coal and oil miners still encroach upon indigenous land. For instance, armed groups and the indigenous engaged in land disputes which resulted in 61 indigenous deaths between 1995 and 2003 (“A Promise Unkept” 2009). Moreover, the indigenous continue to face significant economic and social disadvantages; many indigenous peoples lack health and educational services, clean water and sewage facilities and proper nutrition. Many Venezuelan citizens also expressed their concerns that the government is merely “giving the indigenous peoples handouts” rather than helping them to develop (“A Promise Unkept” 2009). Therefore, the fact that the government has been incapable of protecting indigenous rights, and has met considerable opposition from the elite when attempting to, indicates that there has not been any significant deviation from the elite attitude towards lower social classes since decolonization.

At present, Mexico and Venezuela seem as though they are following different paths of political development. It is clear that in recent years Chávez is straying from a democratic path of development by enhancing the powers of the executive to the point that it has become an authoritarian regime. Meanwhile, as Mexico continues to make the
transition to a democratic system little by little, it is hard to predict whether these changes will continue in the same direction, or if they will unravel because of the violence and corruption for which the Mexican state is notorious. Even if Mexico and Venezuela are currently following these different paths of development, two key characteristics remain constant: (1) both countries have exceedingly dominant executive offices that continue to direct the political agenda of the country, and (2) the indigenous sectors of their societies do not enjoy the same status they once enjoyed in the political system before the colonization of the Americas. These characteristics still exist due to the fact that the elite successfully utilized their collective identity to justify the dominant power of the executive office in order to repress these marginalized sectors for close to 500 years.
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