

in the late 1940s, Venezuela was ruled by dictators until 1958 when Marcos Pérez Jiménez was overthrown. Rómulo Betancourt, founder and leader of the Acción Democrática (AD) party was elected president. Since then power has alternated between the AD (social democrats) and COPEI (christian democrats). The incumbent president, Carlos Andrés Pérez, (referred to commonly as "CAP") was elected in 1988. He had previously been president from 1974 to 1979.

The 1961 constitution established a congressional system of government with a clear separation of the executive, legislative and judicial powers. The president is elected every five years by popular vote; he cannot succeed himself. The Congress, comprising a House of Representatives (201 members) and a Senate (49 members) is elected at the same time, also by popular vote, under a system of proportional representation. Along with current serious efforts to democratize the political parties, it is expected that Congress will approve a change in the electoral system so that in future a significant proportion of the deputies be elected directly, rather than designated by the party leadership.

Venezuela is a federal republic, comprising 22 states and a federal district. In another significant move towards democratization, in 1989 for the first time the state governors and town mayors were elected by popular vote, rather than appointed by the president. More recently, in December 1992, in new local elections, more than half the governors and mayors were from opposition parties, notably the Christian-Democrat party, COPEI.

2. The Current Political Situation

This year, 1993, is a highly political one for Venezuela with elections for a new president as well as a new congress to take place on 5 December, and public attention preoccupied with the debate about the candidates and the issues.

President Carlos Andrés Pérez is thus in his last year in office, and to some extent his government has the aspect of "fin de régime". Last year was a difficult one for Pérez and for the country, with two attempted military coups (on 4 February and 27 November), considerable civil unrest, and unremitting efforts by various hostile elements of the body politic to see him leave