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Tres fases de la violencia homicida en Venezuela

Three phases of homicidal violence in Venezuela

Roberto Briceño-León¹

Abstract *Venezuela was considered one of the least violent countries in Latin America, however by 2010 it was among the countries with the highest homicide rate. This article analyzes the evolution of homicides in Venezuela between 1985 and 2010 and proposes the existence of three stages which correspond to trends in social and political institutions of the country. The first from 1985 to 1993, characterized by the looting of 1989 and the coups d'état of 1992, when for the first time the homicide rate rose from 8 to 20. The second phase from 1994 to 1998 was a recovery period of the institutional and political stability when the homicide rate remained constant at around 20. The third phase began in 1999 with the H Chavez government and the institutional destruction that comes with the Bolivarian revolution and caused an increase in the rate of 20 to 57 homicides per 100 thousand inhabitants. This article argues that the explanation for the changes in the phases is to be found in the transformation of social and political institutions.*

Key words *Homicide, Venezuela, politics, violence, institutions, society*

Resumen *Venezuela era considerado uno de los países menos violentos de América Latina, sin embargo para el año 2010 estaba entre los que mostraban la más alta tasa de homicidios. Este artículo analiza la evolución de los homicidios ocurridos en Venezuela entre 1989 y 2010 y plantea la existencia de tres etapas que se corresponden a distintos momentos de la institucionalidad social y política del país. La primera de 1985 a 1993, caracterizada por la crisis social de los saqueos de 1989 y los golpes de estado de 1992, cuando por primera vez se incrementa la tasa de homicidios de 8 a 20. La segunda fase va desde 1994 hasta 1998 que fue un periodo de recuperación de la institucionalidad y de estabilidad política cuando la tasa de homicidios se mantuvo sin variaciones alrededor de 20. Y la tercera fase que se inicia en 1999 con el gobierno de H Chávez y la destrucción institucional que ocurre con la revolución bolivariana y que provocó un incremento de la tasa de 20 a 57 homicidios por 100 mil habitantes. El artículo sostiene que la explicación de los cambios en las fases debe buscarse en las transformaciones de la institucionalidad social y política.*

Palabras clave *Homicidios, Venezuela, Política, Violencia, Institucionalidad, Sociedad*

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Introduction

Venezuela was not on the list of violent countries in the 1980s. On the contrary, it was an example of democracy, social policies, and peaceful behavior^{1,2}. The situation changed sharply in a few years, and Venezuela came to be one of the countries with the most homicides in the world, the number of dead doubling, tripling, and even quadrupling in the course of two decades³⁻⁶. How can we organize and understand that process?

The institutional approach to Violence and Homicides

Violence is constituted by many forms of threat or effective use of physical force in order to assault others or oneself⁷⁻⁹. Of all violent acts, the one of greatest significance is homicide. In homicide, the victim loses his life, and it is therefore a final act.

Scholars that study violence consider homicides to be the best indicator, although not the only one, for approaching the problem^{3,10-12}.

In order to define the phases of homicides in Venezuela and propose conjectures about its evolution, we rely on the theory of Institutions¹³, understood as the rules governing social relations, and the social pact that orders everyday life and make it predictable¹⁴.

The institutions, considered as a latent variable, condenses a dimension of social life that allows to construct a social order¹⁵ regulated by rules and agreements¹⁶. Institutions are a symbolic order¹⁷ that exist in all societies, regulate the use of force and attempt to replace it with alternative mechanisms of conflict resolution.

The institutional normative framework prescribed some behaviors and proscribes unwanted ones (Merton, 1965). It builds legitimacy of social control mechanisms either formal or informal to force compliance or punish offenders¹⁸. This dimension has been considered both in theory and in its translation into public policy in Latin America as citizen culture¹⁹, or as a civic culture²⁰.

The institutional framework is therefore not a legal fact, but normative one, which may or may not be expressed in laws, but it must always be expressed in the regulation of social relationships and therefore be known and respected in compliance by stakeholders²¹. When it does not, there is a major split in societies that causes conflicts and returns to the use of force as a tool to achieve goals and resolve personal or social con-

licts and therefore produce an increase in violence and homicides^{10,22-24}.

The Cycles in Violence in Venezuela

The situation of violence in Venezuela has been very unequal. In the second half of the twentieth century, there were political and social conflicts, but little violence was maintained. Until the 1950s, violence in Venezuela was a small problem of the rural areas-local conflicts that originated either in the absence of the state or in the excess of government due to the abuse of power of their representatives. The rapid process of urbanization, which took more than half of the population to live in cities in the 1950s, changed this panorama. The military dictatorship of the 1950s imposed a political order that, while it had purposes of political control, permitted the violence to be maintained in some very low levels²⁵.

The beginning of democratic governments at the end of the 1950s and the appearance of the rural and urban guerrilla in the 1960s were marked by some years of political instability and instability of security. In this period, there were various uprisings of military groups against the government elect, which carried out bloody confrontations with military sectors. The guerrilla groups, dedicated to the focal actions of subversion in rural areas and of urban terrorism, represented a source of political violence that, nevertheless, was not able to win the support of the population. After a few years, the political parties involved abandoned the armed fight and turned to the pacification of the country in order to continue the fight for achieving the political power using electoral instead of violent means. The Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV) and the Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR) were legalized and began their participation in the electoral processes in 1968²⁶.

The homicides in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, was kept between 1,000 and 1,500 murders each year and a rate between 8 and 10 victims per 100,000 inhabitants. This situation alters for the first time in 1989 when an important jump occurs and a long cycle of violence begins in Venezuela, which has already lasted a quarter of a century.

The 22 years that have gone by from 1989 until 2010 can be organized by chronological periods, economic policies, or periods of government. The proposal we make is to work on the information from a constructivist perspective formulating the historical periods with "phases" that describe the dominate tendency of the cycle

and the “events” or break points that mark an inflexion in the direction of the social process²⁷, which we think should be interpreted from an institutional perspective^{13,28}.

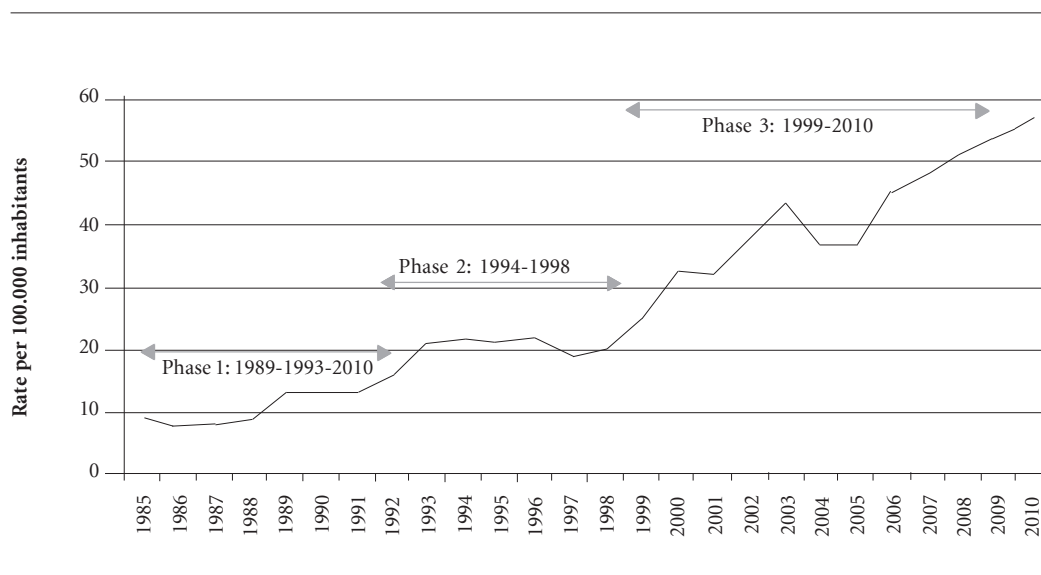
The first period that takes place between 1989 and 1993 is marked by a suddenly increase in homicides linked to the social and political unrest that produce the first “Institutional Crises” that occurred in the country after a period (1963-1988) of political stability and low violence. The second happens starting from the arrival of President Caldera in 1994 until the end of his term in 1999, which I propose to call the “Institutional Recovery” due to its renewed stability. Finally, the third period is that of accelerated growth in homicides that occurs from 1999 to 2010, during the President Chavez terms in office, which I will call “Institutional Destruction” (Graph 1).

1989-1993: Institutional Crisis

This stage is constituted by relevant events that drive the increase in violence in Venezuela and that carry out the first systematic studies of the phenomenon in the country²⁹⁻³¹. The first was the looting called “El Caracazo,” which occurred in February of 1989 and had a great social and political impact. The “Caracazo” was a popular revolt dedicated to plundering business and lighting vehicles on fire, occurring after an increase in the price of gasoline and of public transporta-

tion. The confrontations between the people and the repression of the army resulted in many fatalities. In 1989 there were 2,513 deaths, and we specify that in that moment, one fifth, 534 murders, occurred in one week in one city: Caracas³². In the following years, the figure of homicides did not lower in any significant way, but it did not rise either.

In 1989, one finds the first signal of the crisis of broken dreams—dreams of an always better future that had been promised by the petroleum prosperity of the 1970s, when petroleum income per capita tripled between 1973 and 1974 and generated a generalized expectation of easy, large, and rapid wealth in the population³³. Even though the improvement and social mobility derived from petroleum took more than 50 years, the grand prosperity that took place in the middle of the 1970s lasted hardly a few more years, and in 1980, a decline began in real income of the wage-earning population. The lack of funds of a government that, paradoxically, had been full of debts in the years of the greatest affluence, halted the continuation of populist politics and generalized subsidies and forced the establishment of control of foreign exchange rates in 1983. Control of foreign exchange rates was common in many other Latin American countries, but an absolute novelty in Venezuela, where for 20 years the price of the American dollar had been maintained at a fixed rate³⁴⁻³⁶.



Graph 1. Venezuela 1989-2010. Three phases of homicidal violence.

Source: ^{5,7,53,63,66,67}

The collective and generalized transgression of February 1989 showed that the illusion of harmony that for years had guaranteed social peace in the country had evaporated³⁷. The popular revolt was a consequence of nine years of real salaries reduction, of controlled prices and scarcity of basic goods, like sugar and milk, diapers and feminine hygiene products. Beyond the pillage, the “Caracazo” involved open looting, discreet robbery, and stealing from others; beyond the street feasts or the risky deaths, the “Caracazo” signified an institutional breakdown. The revolt and the ransacking broke an important part of the social contract, and it was not for the goods, few or many, that some lost, but for the loss of vigor in social norms that had governed urban life.

That institutional crisis would find itself reinforced three years afterwards by the attempts at coups d’état in February and November 1992. In this case, the event is not about a civil revolt but a military one; it is not a spontaneous reaction but a plotted and planned action with years of patient conspiring. The military insurrections were neither particularly bloody nor bloodless. The military uprisings were armed, and the arms were shot against other Venezuelans with the consequence of dozen of Venezuelans, military and civil, killed in the confrontation. In 1992, the figure of homicides rose to 3,336 deaths, and the rate passed 16 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants (Table 1).

The greatest impact of these events was an institutional breakdown that provoked some substantial changes in the social contract. Violence was established as a tool in order to reach individual goals; also established were the banality of the law and social norms and the disdain for the rules of the political and social game. In those years, a generalized discontent consolidat-

ed among the population. The years of decline had affected the conscience of the Venezuelans, and the reserves of political trust in the leader had been used up. The president of the republic was tried and removed from office, his own party members abandoning him. Over a short lapse of time, two temporary presidents followed on another, political parties lost strength, and an institutional uncertainty seized the country, who feared a new coup d’état all the time.

In the following years, after the coups d’état, violent crimes increased, and for the first time in history, the number of homicides grew to four thousand (4,292) in 1993 and the homicide rate reached 21 for 100,000 people. The relatively few victims of the coups d’état do not take away the impact of the violence³⁸.

The “Caracazo” and the coups can be understood in many ways and can offer diverse and even opposing explanations of the reasons or justifications of its occurrence. Nevertheless, what is difficult to repute and easy to find consensus on is that both events represented an important institutional crisis and a breakdown of basic elements of the Venezuelan social contract. In the Caracazo, the collective looting and destruction of goods broke the coexistence and the social order of respect for one another and for property. There is a symbolic rule that limits people and mandates that they can’t enter a store and leave without paying for the food, the paintings, or the televisions. To say this is almost a truism, but those evident acts of limitation are what constitute the social contract. During the days of the Caracazo, that was what happened: observance of the limits was suspended.

The coups d’état in 1992 were not announced nor suspected by the common population. The country awoke with surprise two dawns in the same year by a military group that tried to take the power by a shortcut of force and that with its actions broke the pact of democracy, which obligated the government to arrive by rules of competence and election, by votes and not by threat of arms. Just as the Caracazo broke social institutionality, the coups d’état dissolved political agreement; they make democratic rules dispensable and superficial and justified the use of violence in order to reach political goals³⁹.

The explanation of the increase in homicide in this period must be found in these two historical events and in the legitimization of looting and violence as an appropriate tool of social and political action. Although these circumstances arise from the social protest or political struggle

Table 1. Homicides in Venezuela.
First Phase: 1989-1993.

Year	Cases	Rate per 100,000 inhabitants
1985	1,675	9
1986	1,501	8
1987	1,485	8
1988	1,709	9
1989	2,513	13
1990	2,474	13
1991	2,502	13
1992	3,366	16
1993	4,292	21

Source: 5,7,66,67

arena, they have had an effect on the increase of everyday occurrence of criminal violence.

1994-1998: Institutional Recovery

In 1994, homicide figures reached a new record: 4,732 dead. That year, a new government was established in the country after turbulent years of instability, signaled by the removal of the President of the Republic and the designation of various substitutes in a short period of time. The arrival of President Caldera signified a notable effort to return to tranquility and institutionality. Perhaps due to his age and his own political personality, he did not take on many of the changes that society was demanding; but he dedicated himself to returning stability to the institutions and allowing the future to become predictable.

The second government of President Caldera (he had already been president between 1969 and 1973) was one part conservation and one part renovation. Or we could say that there were two governments in one. The first part of his government was conservative in the sense that it followed the political orientation of statism and maintained the same formulas that had already been in effect for some years: price controls, subsidies of multiple products, foreign exchange rate control, and not raising the price of gasoline. The second part the term changed into a more liberal and participative government⁴⁰. But despite his conservative and populist character, it seems to us that the most important goals and achievements in both parts were strengthening institutionality and the return of the peace. That was the same criterion that was used in order to free the soldiers who took part in the coup in 1992, which to us seemed to search for reconciliation of the country and the return to democratic institutionality (Table 2).

Starting in 1996, it seemed that another government had arrived in power. In March 1996,

the president announced the appointment of an old political adversary and former guerrilla leader as Minister of Planning. T. Petkoff carried out two policies that contradicted what happened previously: the control of foreign exchange rates and prices was dismantled, and an increase in the price of gasoline began⁴¹. Other measures like the change in the labor law of social provisions proved to be equally unpopular, but the process of stabilization of society had borne many fruits and there were no protests or uprisings, even though the popularity of the president and his government fell and was accompanied by the collapse of the credibility of political parties.

The specific policies of citizen safety did not make great advances; it was a little more than what had already been done, perhaps with the innovation that members of many diverse political forces who had supported the candidacy of Caldera participated in the government. Additionally, the Ministry of the Interior resisted the pressures to facilitate to armament of citizens. Nevertheless, despite the few spectacular actions undertaken by the government, our hypothesis is that the context of the institutional reinforcement that had been deployed during the first two years yielded results: the rate of homicides in the country stopped its increase.

The consequence of this policy, perhaps unanticipated, was a reduction in violence that resulted in a change in the trend of homicide figures of the country: in 1998 there were 4,550 homicides, two hundred fewer than five years before.

1999-2010: The Institutional Destruction

For some reasons that prove to be difficult to understand, since the first year of the government of President Chávez, a notable increase in violence and homicides has taken place. Surprisingly, after five years of stagnation, a jump occurred, and the figures went from 4,550 in 1998 to 5,968 – almost six thousand – in 1999. This meant 1,421 homicides more than the year before, an increase of 31%, a third more of homicides without any special event occurring, neither popular revolt nor a coup d'état.

But even more surprising is the fact that in the following years, that increase did not stop but continued increasing sharply. In the year 2000, it reached 8,022, an increase of two thousand more deaths than in the previous year. In the year 2001, the figure kept almost the same at 7,960, and in the year 2002, the increase is 2,600 more

Table 2. Homicides in Venezuela.
Second Phase: 1994-1998.

Year	Cases	Rate per 100,000 inhabitants
1994	4,733	22
1995	4,481	21
1996	4,961	22
1997	4,225	19
1998	4,550	20

Source: 5,7,53,66,67

homicides, reaching a total of 9,617. In the following year comes another increase of 1,725 homicides more than the previous year, arriving at the dramatic figure of 11,342 victims of homicide. What happened during those years that could help us understand the reasons of such a sudden increase?

It would seem that the explanation lies in the institutional destruction that broke out starting when President Chávez took power and with his policies of restriction of police action and speeches of uprising that spoiled the efforts of political stabilization that had been made in the previous years⁴², just as the processes of regularization and depersonalization of the norms had been achieved, although very fragily, by the democratic governments in the previous decades⁴³.

From the moment he took power, the president elect accepted and did not accept the legality and norms that had sworn him in, and he swore before the “moribund” constitution. In a following speech, he affirmed that is someone was hungry, it could be and was legitimate to steal, constituting a normative breakdown of profound social impact. It is obvious that the president was not seeking an increase in crime, but accumulating political sympathies and promoting the social confrontation and polarization that had so benefited him electorally^{44,45}. However, the results of that message were to demolish the legitimacy of norms and security, since these forms of behavior are intrinsically related. The intentions were to encourage a subversive social action, but the immediate interpretation that some Venezuelans made, above all those on the verge of transgression, was a permission to break the law and an increase in common delinquency.

The events and the political conflicts of the years 2002 and 2003, with the successive marches and countermarches, the dismissal of public employees, the resignation and return of the president of the republic, the national strike of PD-VSA workers at the end of 2002, and the paralyzation of the country and its everyday life until the beginning of 2003, everything contributed to the destruction of the social contract. Breaking the norms of social, democratic, or political life was common among all the sectors; it did not matter who had the greater or lesser responsibility or who was to blame⁴⁶. What is certain is that the rules lost strength and stopped regulating the political fight or social life. This occurred for political reasons—from a fight for the power which none of the sectors at odds with each other were able to impose completely, but the consequences

were thrown into everyday life, with protests and clashes⁴⁷. Studies show that when a society is divided or a great exclusion of a social sector takes place, violence and homicides tend to increase^{48,49}.

In the years 2004 and 2005, there was a slight decrease in homicide mortality, and homicides were below ten thousand deaths. The decrease in homicides was transitory. During these years the government created some parallel forms of the State that permitted a successful direct transfer of resources and offered social services with the creation of scholarship programs, subsidized food programs (Mercal), and services like literacy programs, alternative methods of education and primary health service in Barrio Adentro^{50,51}. These programs were paid with the increase of oil prices in the international market, that took place, firstly, as a consequence of the increase in the demand for crude oil in China and India and later because the fall in returns in other commodities led speculative businesses to invest in the oil market.

But it seems to us that the reduction in homicides in 2004-2005 is not due to the social programs but to the generalized use and presence of the armed forces in distinct zones of the country in order to carry out or support these social interventions. In the case of the thousands of Cuban doctors, the military protected them from crime, provided them transportation and supplies and, at the same time, prevented some from fleeing to the United States.

In those years, homicides and income from the sale of petroleum continued increasing. The price per barrel of oil surpassed US\$ 32 in 2004, US\$ 46 in 2005, US\$ 56 in 2006, US\$ 64 in 2007, and US\$ 86 in 2008⁵². Homicides rose to 12,000 victims in 2006, 13,000 in 2007, 14,000 in 2008, and 17,600 in 2010, as can be seen in Table 3. The violence continued and increased while the country entered in great prosperity and it was not only restricted to homicides, since robbery and kidnapping increase⁵³, and also violent responses in communities^{54,55}, as in the cases of lynchings⁵⁶, revenge (*culebras* in Spanish)⁵⁷, and crime as a whole⁴.

The explanation of that apparent contradiction once again lies in institutionality and has two components: the impunity and praise of violence. During those years, the national government decided not to act against crime and upheld what can be affirmed as the common element in all policies of citizen safety in the decade: do not suppress. The reasons for this behavior are very different. On one hand there has existed the idea that crime has its origins in poverty and that pre-

Table 3. Homicides in Venezuela
Third Phase: 1999-2010.

Year	Cases	Rate per 100,000 inhabitants
1999	5,968	25
2000	8,022	33
2001	7,960	32
2002	9,617	38
2003	11,342	44
2004	9,719	37
2005	9,964	37
2006	12,257	45
2007	13,156	48
2008	14,589	52
2009	16,047	54
2010	17,600	57

Source: (29)

ventative social policies alone can revert the temptation of crime. On the other hand, there has existed the very clear desire to not be considered a repressive government, and therefore the measures that could be unpopular or permit an excess in police, as had exactly happened in the past, were eliminated^{58,59}. The problem was that upon straightening up this paralysis of law enforcement, the moral bad and the good dimensions were both expelled. Excessive police was avoided, but, in the politicization, the adequate and necessary police action was discouraged and tied up⁶⁰. In this way, security policy was left lame by taking away the coercive component and restricting it exclusively to social prevention.

The decision of the authorities to not suppress brought a decrease in detentions, disorder to judicial processes, and greater impunity^{61,62}. In the year 1998, for each 100 homicides, there were 118 arrests, a few detentions more than the committed homicides; a few years later, this figure decreased drastically and in the years 2006 to 2010, there were barely 9 arrests for every 100 homicides. This means that in 91% of homicides, there is not even one arrest, much less a ruling or sentence⁶³.

Additionally, we find that in the country the messages of praise of violence, death, weapons, and war have become common and repeated. These contents spread by people invested in authority and repeated en masse, have debilitated the peaceful mechanisms of conflict resolution and have promoted weapons, force, and violence as behavior. At the end of 2009, the National Assembly enacted a law that prohibited the im-

portation and sale of war toys and the sale and use of videogames with violent content; the measure, a bit extreme and exotic, called attention to the situation but did not have any impact, since violence and war is in the street and in the official message. What does prohibiting toys that are simulations of weapons accomplish if it boosts the use of actual weapons by people and establishes the phrase "the people in arms" as a slogan of the "Bolivarian militia"⁶⁴.

Upon the fall of oil prices in 2009 and deterioration of social programs⁶⁵, the situation of violence did not change and homicides continued. The estimations of the Venezuelan Observatory of Violence for the year 2010 were 17,600 homicides and a rate of 57 per 100,000 inhabitants⁶⁶. However, these figures are less than the more than 19,000 homicides and the rate of 75 per 100,000 inhabitants that the government's National Survey of Victimization and Perception of Citizen Safety reported⁵³. The Minister of the Interior and Justice recognized a rate of 48 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants after seven years of silence.

By the pressure from citizens⁶⁷, the national government recognized what it had denied for years: that in the twelve years of this third phase, homicides had tripled and had turned Venezuela into one of most violent and unsafe nations in Latin America.

We believe that the explanation of this excessive and accelerated increase should be found in the process of institutional destruction that has been carried out in the country by the national government in a deliberate manner^{68,69}.

The reasons of such erratic action from the government are hardly clear, but they can basically be reduced to the idea that a revolution has been attempted to be carried out and in order to achieve it, one should destroy what previously existed, the *status quo* of society⁷⁰. Government has simply tried to finish with the *Ancien Régime*, in the classic version of the French revolution, by constructing forms and actors of different power. The reasons have therefore been political, having to do with the game of power and shift of the forces in conflict, but its consequences are a breakdown in the country's general institutionality and increase in violence.

It seems to us that the only way to understand the changes in the 22 years that passed between 1989 and 2010 is through the changes in the symbolic institutional frame of society. Until now, and for reasons justified or not, an exaggerated weight has been given to the social conditions of poverty and inequality⁷¹, and the institutional arrange-

ments and the coexistence founded in the social contract have been undervalued. The Venezuelan Government considers that violence and crime are a consequence of poverty and inequality, however, the same government in its report on the Status of the Millennium Development Goals, indicates that the goal of reducing extreme poverty households was achieved in 2006, down from 20.7% in 1998 to 7.2% in 2009. And also reports that inequality has declined and Gini coefficient decrease from 0.4885 in 1998 to 0.3928 in 2008⁷².

If poverty and inequality decreased, and homicides increased in the period 1998-2010, we cannot consider them as the cause of the murders.

The explanation must be sought in other social dimensions, such as institutions. The organization of phases allows us to understand the changes in the regulatory environment and establish an association between political moments and the magnitude of the killings. The description of phases and events that change them, allows us make conjectures about the reasons and changes in crime.

The Venezuelan experience, painful and tragic for both the victims and survivors, shows how institutions can be the key element for the explanation of that tragedy and for the formulation of the appropriate public policies that can pacify society.

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