In the mid-1950s, a military government bent on modernizing Venezuela razed dozens of slums in the heart of the capital Caracas, replacing them with massive buildings to house the city’s working poor. The project remained unfinished when the dictatorship fell on January 23, 1958, and in a matter of days city residents illegally occupied thousands of apartments, squatted on green spaces, and renamed the neighborhood to honor the emerging democracy: the 23 de Enero (January 23).

Granting legitimacy to the state through the vote but protesting its failings with violent street actions when necessary, inhabitants of el veintitrés laid the foundation for an expansive understanding of democracy—both radical and electoral—whose features still resonate today.

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