

### 3 Social Cleavages, Political Polarization and Democratic Breakdown in Venezuela

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The breakdown of the Venezuelan party-centred democracy has been a result of a political conflict between traditional pro-system and recently emerged anti-system parties. This claim contrasts with the commonly accepted structural explanation, which argues that the collapse of Venezuelan partyarchy was an effect of insoluble economic problems and the failure of the shock-therapy reforms implemented by Carlos Andrés Pérez and Rafael Caldera, which exacerbated social cleavages between the richest and the poor.

Key words: democracy, Venezuela, polarization, democratic breakdown, social cleavages, transition, democratic deconsolidation

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El colapso de la democracia partido-céntrica en Venezuela fue el resultado de las tensiones políticas entre los tradicionales partidos pro-sistema y partidos antisistema recientemente creados. Este argumento contrasta con las explicaciones estructuralistas más comúnmente aceptadas, las cuales aducen que el colapso de la democracia venezolana fue el resultado de insolubles problemas económicos y de la falla de las terapias de shock implementadas por los gobiernos de Carlos Andrés Pérez y Rafael Caldera, las cuales habrían exacerbado los conflictos sociales entre los venezolanos más ricos y los más pobres.

Palabras claves: Democracia, Venezuela, Polarización, Quiebre de la Democracia, Conflicto Social, Transición, De-consolidación de la Democracia.

## Introduction

A major political change took place in Venezuela at the beginning of the 1990's. After the stressful second term of Carlos Andrés Pérez, Rafael Caldera's disaffiliation from COPEI, and the erratic policies of his second administration, the apparently institutionalized Venezuelan mass-based partyarchy broke down. From that moment to the present time, AD and COPEI, the former overly-powerful Venezuelan party machineries, have been repeatedly defeated by emerging and apparently weaker party organizations.<sup>1</sup> The decay of AD and the even more unexpected division of the Christian Democratic COPEI in multiple new parties<sup>2</sup> led to an unusually high level of volatility and extreme polarization in the 1993 and 1998 elections. Thereafter, the personalistic leadership of Hugo Chavez, supported by the MVR and many smaller left-wing and personalistic parties (the PPT, the PCV, MEP, MI GATO, elected indigenous representative among others) has apparently consolidated power.

This paper addresses this transition process from a system where parties were the most important political actors (a strong partyarchy) to another in which parties have become weaker and thinner and the most important actor is the president. This transition took place in a relatively short period of time. Although the decay of traditional parties was evident in 1993, the 1998 Presidential election was a crucial turning point.

My main argument is that the crisis of the Venezuelan democracy has been politically driven. In other words, the breakdown of the Venezuelan party-centered democracy has been a result of a political conflict between pro-system and anti-system parties. This claim contrasts with the commonly accepted structural explanation, which argues that the collapse of Venezuelan partyarchy was an effect of insoluble economic problems, and the failure of the shock-therapy reforms implemented by Carlos Andrés Pérez and Rafael Caldera, which exacerbated social cleavages between the richest and the poor. Economic crisis might have harmed clientelistic linkages between traditional parties and their constituencies. As a matter of fact, the economic crisis

of the nineties severally hit traditional parties' constituencies – the urban middle and working classes. However, at least during the crucial 1998 electoral campaign, class cleavages and economic issues were less important than political changes and political polarization between anti-system and system parties.

## The relevance of the system-antisystem cleavage in Venezuela

Form 1958 to 1998, political parties monopolized instruments of political participation, subordinated all other forms of political or social organization, limited the autonomy and transparency of the judiciary, built a corrupted mechanism of electoral financing, and developed highly inefficient and unaccountable linkages with organized interest groups (unions and business organizations) based on the clientelistic distribution of oil revenues. The political regime existing in Venezuela from 1958 to 1998 was, in sum, a "partyarchy" instead of a polyarchy (Coppedge 1994).

During the partyarchy era AD was the most relevant mass-based party. In this period, basically from 1958 to 1993, seven out of nine presidents were AD national leaders and this party regularly gained at least 40 percent of the votes in lower house elections. Several different leftist and center-left parties challenged AD for a long time, but during almost

1 Party names are listed in appendix 1.

2 Unlike AD, COPEI never experienced an important division prior to 1993. However, once President Rafael Caldera left the party in 1993, COPEI progressively divided into multiple fractions. Caldera and his followers created Convergencia in 1993. In 1997, the former governor Henrique Salas Romer founded PV in 1997. In 1999, the former governor and presidential Oswaldo Álvarez Paz left his party behind and supported Chávez for a short period. During the same year, Henrique Capriles Radonski, former Vice President of the Congress, and other younger copeyano leaders joined a group that later would found the MPJ. Moreover, some emblematic intellectuals, academics and national leaders of COPEI campaigned for Chavez and supported his proposal for constitution reform. Finally, in 2000, the successful governor Enrique Mendoza organized EM, a regional electoral machine. Mendoza, who was one of the most important leaders of the opposition during the 2002-2003 strikes, upheavals and coup d'état, has never left COPEI or has been expelled from the party, but he has put a huge distance between his personal image and COPEI.

forty years AD was the most important labor-based and social reformist organization in Venezuelan politics, and the center-right COPEI was the only alternative.

Before Chavez' era, Venezuelan politics and parties were so important that, for many years, the divide between political and apolitical was more relevant than any other cleavage, and being political meant being partisan (Martz and Baloyra, 1979: 192-193). Consistently, during the critical elections of 1993 and 1998, the cleavage between political and anti-political was explicitly exploited by anti-party leaders like Caldera and Velazquez (in 1993) and Chavez and Salas Römer (in 1998). Since Venezuelan democratic institutions were built and strongly shaped by traditional parties, it is not surprising to find that the cleavage between partisan and anti-partisan turned out to be the conflict between pro-system and anti-system parties.

Electoral support for AD and COPEI started to decline in 1993, and since 1998 these two parties have experienced an inescapable political decay. In 1998, for the first time in the history of AD and COPEI, these parties ended up supporting the Presidential candidate of another political organization. In the last moment of the presidential campaign, AD abruptly withdrew its presidential candidate and joined the center-rightist, pro-neoliberal anti-Chávez coalition, led by Henrique Salas (from Proyecto Venezuela). The same thing was done by COPEI – which previously had launched the candidacy of the independent ex-Miss Universe Irene Sáez. In 2000, AD and COPEI neither launched their own presidential candidates nor explicitly supported Lieutenant-Colonel Francisco Arias Cárdenas, a former coup-leader who ran as the main opposition candidate.<sup>3</sup> In sum, during the crucial elections of 1998, the map of party identification was dramatically reshaped (Molina and Perez 2004). AD and COPEI were displaced by newer personalistic parties. The MVR was the most important of these new parties.

The collapse of AD and COPEI may be seen more as an internal implosion due to lack of adaptation to

external changes (Coppedge 2001; Lalander 2004) than an unavoidable consequence of external shocks. In 1993, the last survivor of the partyarchy founding generation, the aged ex-president Rafael Caldera, won the elections after dividing COPEI and making an acrimonious anti-party campaign.<sup>4</sup> In the same election, Andrés Velazquez, another anti-party candidate supported by a thin, regional party, abruptly became a national political leader. Like Caldera, Velázquez made use of extremely radical anti-party rhetoric. Caldera won the presidential election, and LCR took a significant share of votes in the congressional election (see Table ).<sup>5</sup>

Later, during the 1997 pre-campaign and at the beginning of 1998 campaign, the most traditionalist and oldest members of AD led by Luis Alfaro Uceró, the overly powerful *caudillo* and General Secretary, blocked any attempt at party renovation. However, the decay of traditional parties and the emergence of new leadership were more than evident. In that election, the front-runners (Hugo Chávez and Henrique Salas) were outsiders, personalistic, anti-party and anti-system candidates. Chavez ran as radical populist candidate, proud of his failed military rebellions, and his co-partisans tended to be much less

3 Francisco Arias Cárdenas, who was second in command during the leftist military rebellion of February 4, 1992, ran against leftist President Chávez, but he was also a left-wing candidate. He was explicitly supported by two leftist parties, La Causa Radical (LCR, the Radical Cause) and Izquierda Democrática (Democratic Left, a faction of the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS, Movement Toward Socialism); and a small center-right group, (Movimiento de Integridad Nacional, National Integrity Movement).

4 Caldera was supported by a heterogeneous coalition of small antipartyarchy organizations. He named his amorphous coalitions *chiripero*, which in colloquial Venezuelan Spanish means a heavy and annoying collection of coins of small denomination and a large group of small cockroaches. The winning coalition included the new Caldera's party (Convergencia) and a collection of small left-wing and personalistic parties: the MAS, the MEP, the PCV, URD and many other even smaller groups.

5 In 1998, LCR split into two groups. The most radical wing (led by Pablo Medina and Aristóbulo Isturiz) created the PPT. This other party has supported Hugo Chávez as candidate and president. The moderate faction (led by Andrés Velazquez and Alfredo Ramos) has taken part in today's heterogeneous opposition. LCR's electoral share shrank dramatically after the split.

Table 1:  
Share of votes for Venezuelan parties. Lower house elections between 1947-2000 (%).<sup>6</sup>

Election	PCV	VUC	NA	PPT	MVR	LCR	LS	MIR	MAS	MEP	Total Left	AD	URD	COPEI	Others	Total
1947	3.65										3.65	70.83	4.34	16.95	4.23	100.0
1958	6.23										6.23	49.45	26.76	15.2	2.36	100.0
1963											0.00	32.71	17.34	20.82	29.13	100.0
1968	2.82a									12.94	15.76	25.55	9.25	24.03	25.41	100.0
1973	1.20							1.00	5.30	4.97	12.47	44.44	3.20	30.24	9.65	100.0
1978	1.04	0.88						2.35	6.16	2.23	12.66	39.68	1.68	39.8	6.18	100.0
1983	1.75		1.04			0.54	0.57	1.58	5.74	1.96	13.18	49.90	1.91	28.68	6.33	100.0
1988	0.96					1.65	0.81		10.14 b	1.61	15.17	43.24	1.44	31.06	9.09	100.0
1993	0.45					20.66			10.81	0.59	32.51	23.34	0.56	22.62	20.97	100.0
1998	0.53			3.01	18.97	2.45			9.28	0.37	34.61	24.05	0.38	16.96	24.00	100.0
2000	0.36			2.27	44.25	4.40			5.31	0.08	56.67	16.07	0.06	5.1	22.10	100.0
2005					100.0						100.0	0.00	0.00	0.00		100.0

a PCV was banned in 1961 for leading a guerrilla insurgency. In 1968, Communists ran for Congress under a façade party (UPA)

b MIR and MAS fused in 1988

willing to support democracy and electoral competition than other politicians (Ramos 2001). Salas, who had broken with COPEI in 1989, made use of the image of an anti-party, pro-market, ex-governor and successful businessman.

### Personalistic politics in the Chavez Era

Venezuelan Partyarchy has been finally replaced by a personalistic regime. This new type of political order had no precedent in the history of the Venezuelan politics. During the years of stable partyarchy, some personalistic military officers and a few businessmen attempted to organize political movements, but none survived beyond one national election. In the 1960s, for instance, businessmen and former military men, followers of the former dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez, founded some ephemeral rightist and militarist parties (the so-called *perezjimenismo*) that promptly decayed.<sup>7</sup> This has apparently been the final destiny of Salas Römer and his right-wing PV after the 1998 presidential election, but certainly it is not the case of the Chavez's movement.

Chavez and his co-partisan have led the first successful military, left-wing and anti-party movement in Venezuelan political history. Before the advent of Chavism, every single important party had been cre-

ated by civilians – mainly intellectuals, academics and union leaders. AD and COPEI were founded by students, intellectuals and labor leaders. The same happened in the case of the many small left-wing parties. The PCV, which was the first modern Venezuelan party, was created by students, writers and artists. Other equally minor leftist parties – such as the MIR, MEP, MAS, and LCR – were founded by union leaders, students, and intellectuals. In sharp contrast, the “*chavista*” movement has been led by explicitly anti-party retired military officers. Many active military have also enthusiastically supported Chavez and his movement. In sum, Chavism has been an original political phenomenon. It has been

- 6 Note: AD, Acción Democrática (Democratic Action); LCR, La Causa Radical (the Radical Cause); LS, Liga Socialista (Socialist League); MAS, Movimiento al Socialismo (Movement Toward Socialism); MEP, Movimiento Electoral del Pueblo (People's Electoral Movement); MIR, Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (Revolutionary Leftist Movement); MVR, Movimiento V República (Movement of the Fifth Republic); NA, Nueva Alternativa (New Alternative); PCV, Partido Comunista de Venezuela (Communist Party of Venezuela); PPT, Patria Para Todos (Homeland for All); URD, Unión Republicana Democrática (Democratic Republican Union); VUC, Vanguardia Unida Comunista (United Communist Vanguard). Source: Consejo Nacional Electoral.
- 7 The most important of these “perezjimenistas” organizations was the Cruzada Cívica Nacionalista (CCN, Nationalist Civic Crusade), which continued to participate in elections, but without the involvement of Pérez Jiménez himself.

both the first victorious military-lead movement and the first winning radical left-wing party.

The earliest antecedent of MVR was the Ejército Bolivariano Revolucionario Doscientos (EBR-200, Bolivarian Revolutionary Army 200). This was a clandestine revolutionary organization created by then-Captain Hugo Chávez and some other young officials from the army in the early 1980s. In 1982, many other officials from the air force and the navy, and a few civilians, joined this subversive movement. That year, it was renamed MBR-200 (Blanco 1998).

The MBR-200 surreptitiously conspired for about a decade against parties and party-centered democracy.<sup>8</sup> In 1992, taking advantage of the general discontent with President Carlos Andrés Pérez and political parties, the MBR-200 made two attempts to overthrow the government. The rebels were supported by some members of the most radical leftist parties – mainly the communist PCV, PRV, and a faction of LCR led by the congressman Pablo Medina – but the movement was commanded by the Lieutenant-Colonel Hugo Chávez and other young military officials. However, once the leaders of MBR-200 were in prison, they were increasingly backed by both leftist and conservative politicians and intellectuals, many of them with a large tradition of opposition to parties (Pereira-Almao 2001).<sup>9</sup> In 1994, President Rafael Caldera made use of his constitutional power to pardon the rebels. Chávez spent two years organizing his movement across the whole country. In 1997, the MVR was officially registered to run in the 1998 national election.

The formal structure of the MVR is very much like that of any other traditional Venezuelan party. It mirrors the political-administrative division of the Venezuelan federal state. It has national, state, and local authorities. But its structure is in fact quite different from that of a typical bureaucratic organization. The MVR is defined by its statutes as a “movement.” This word alludes to some type of permanent political activity and mobilization of the people (Pereira-Almao 2001).<sup>10</sup> In practice, since 1998 the MVR has been in permanent electoral mode and in violent confrontation with the opposi-

tion, thus the party has been a peculiar mixture of electoral machine and hit squads.

Nonetheless, Chávez has tried to avoid creating a permanent political structure. To this end, he has created specific and ephemeral organizations to face each particular electoral or political event. These informal organizations have been superimposed on formal authorities. They have been task forces that can be quickly assembled and dismantled according to Chavez’s will and command (see Table 2 below). President Chávez has been both the President of the party and the main leader of the informal party structure (he calls himself “the supreme commander”). He has tolerated neither factionalism nor dissidence. Any party leader who has publicly disagreed with the President has been publicly reprimanded or simply dismissed.<sup>11</sup> The president has appoint-

8 The most important leaders of the military movement then were Hugo Chávez, Francisco Arias-Cárdenas (who was elected to government in 1995 and ran against Chávez as a presidential candidate in 2000), Yoel Acosta Chirinos, and Jesús Urdaneta Hernández. Today, none is a member of MVR, except Chávez who the President of the party.

9 In the 1990s, many of Chávez’s supporters, such as Pablo Medina (at that moment from LCR), Jose Vicente Rangel (former independent presidential candidate and journalist), and Luis Miquilena (former labor leader, former member of URD, and businessman), were leftist politicians. Some other supporters, such as Jorge Olavarría (demagogue, center-right politician, Presidential candidate of LCR in 1988, businessman, and member of the Asamblea Nacional Constituyente) were entrepreneurial politicians. Some others, such as Oswaldo Alvarez Paz (former presidential candidate for COPEI, and a radical neo-liberal) Erenesto Mayz Vallenilla (former president of the Universidad Simón Bolívar), Ricardo Combellas (former President of the Comisión Presidencial para la Reforma del Estado, COPRE and member of the Asamblea Nacional Constituyente), and Hernán Escarrá (Academic, member of the Asamblea Nacional Constituyente) were not only traditionally conservative but also “pro-COPEI”.

10 Many Venezuelan leftist parties (MIR, MEP, MAS, MBR-200 and MVR, for instance) have defined themselves as a “movement” in reaction to the so-called anti-democratic structure of a centralized AD-like party. Curiously, just a few political organizations (like the radical PCV and the PRV) have used the word party in their names.

11 Luis Miquilena, the veteran union leader and MVR co-founder, was an emblematic case. He and his followers (among them, the former party leader in congress, Ernesto Alvarenga and a small group of congressmen) were expelled from the MVR for speaking out against some of Chavez’s polemic decisions and policies. The same has happened to any public dissident (like Ricardo Combellas and Hernán Escarrá, former constituent assembly members, the former deputy and vice-president of the National Assembly XXX, and many other politicians).

Table 2:  
MVR's ad hoc organizations

Ad hoc organization	Term	Task	Leader	Other members
Comando Político de la Revolución <sup>(1)</sup>	2001–2002	Organize Bolivarian circles and confront eventual “reactionary” coup	Guillermo García Ponce	Vice president, minister, and some party leaders
Comando Ayacucho <sup>(2)</sup>	2003–2004	Avoid consultative referendum and presidential recall using mass mobilization and judicial decisions	Congressman Dario Vivas	MVR congressmen
Comando Maisanta <sup>(3)</sup>	2004	Organize electoral campaign against presidential recall	President Hugo Chávez	Ministers, congressmen, and activists
UBE (Unidades de Batalla Electoral)	2004–2005	Electoral mobilization during the referendum campaign and 2005 Congress election	President Hugo Chávez	Activists, Former Bolivarian Circle members

Source: <sup>(1)</sup> Lévêque (2002); <sup>(2)</sup> Comando Ayacucho (n.d.); <sup>(3)</sup> Comando Maisanta (2004).

ed all members of the ever-changing “command groups” personally. Usually, he has made public his appointments in one of his countless, long mandatory television broadcasts (the *cadena*s). If Chavez has happened to name a formal party leader to a specific ad hoc group, he has not done so on the basis of the leader’s official title.

Formal authorities have not controlled the specific “tactical” forces created by Chávez. Those structures have reported directly to the president, and they have been supposed to have a “direct” connection with rank and file members. From 2002 to 2004, rank and file activists were organized in *círculos bolivarianos* (“Bolivarian circles”). These circles, which have had varying numbers of members, were for a certain period the basic cells of the party’s informal structure. They were highly autonomous, both among themselves and in relation to the party’s formal structure. The circles have had multiple functions, from ideological education to political mobilization, including in some cases violence and intimidation. They were supposed to be ready to “defend the revolution” using “all available means.” The circles were directly connected to the president, who communicated with them mainly by TV and other technological means: Chávez’s

weekly TV program, his frequent extraordinary and mandatory broadcasts, Venezuela’s profuse network of alternative radio and TV stations, and the Internet. Those means were claimed to be expressions of so-called direct or electronic democracy. Nonetheless, the “círculos” were suddenly dismantled and reorganized as UBES in 2004 and 2005.

In summary, the MVR organization is a nationwide amalgam of grassroots groups (Bolivarian circles and UBES), tactical “commands,” and official and informal means of communication, all acting in response to the direct authority of the president. This is a flexible and adaptable organization, comparable to the “disorganized organization” (Levitsky 2003) that characterizes the Peronist party. Most of the current MVR rank and file members are not unionized formal workers but informal-sector employees, small-scale retailers, street merchants, and the unemployed, so a flexible organization seems to be more efficient than formal party bureaucracy and labor unions. This type of organization also helps to preserve the charismatic leadership of the president and safeguards his role as commander in chief. It prevents the formation of self-directed leadership that could eventually tie Chávez’s hands or challenge his supremacy. The unified, versatile, and

Table 3:  
Venezuelan National Elections Dates and Outcomes, 1998–2000 <sup>12</sup>

Type of election	Date	Outcome	Turnout
Presidential Election	December 6, 1998	H. Chávez, 62% H. Salas R., 31%	66.48%
Constitution Amendment Referendum	April 25, 1999	Yes, 87.75% No, 7.26%	37.65%
National Constitutional Assembly	July 25, 1999	MVR 103 members Opposition, 7 members	46.2%
Approval Referendum of the 1999 Constitution	December 15, 1999	Yes, 71.78% No, 28.22%	44.37%
Labor Unions Referendum	December 3, 2000	Yes, 62.02% No, 23.50%	23.5%
Presidential Election	July 30, 2000	H. Chávez, 59.76% F. Arias C., 37.52%	56.31%
National Assembly	July 30, 2000	MVR, 44.38% AD, 16.11% Others, 39.49%	
Municipal Elections	December 3, 2000	MVR, 35.5% (834 concejales) AD, 21.4%, (503 concejales) Others, 43.1	25.1%
Presidential Recall Referendum	August 15, 2004	Yes, 40.74% (a) No, 59.25%	69.98%
National Assembly	December 4, 2005	MVR and allies, 100%	24.9%

personalistic organization of the MVR obviously marks a strong contrast with the heavily fragmented, rigid, bureaucratic structure of AD.

### Electoral game and regime change

In fragile democracies, competitive elections are not the only game in town. Political stability is at stake, and elections may either liberalize or reinforce authoritarian tendencies. Regime uncertainty strongly shape politicians behavior leading them to play a two-levels game: an electoral game for offices and a political struggle for changing the regime (Mainwaring 2003). In this type of game is very difficult for the opposition to cooperate at both levels.

During the so-called Fifth Republic, Venezuelan democracy has become appreciably unstable and fragile. Throughout seven years, Venezuelans have endured a long-lasting process of extreme polarization, a controversial constitutional reform, the dissolution of Congress, two general strikes, a failed coup d'état led by conservative businessmen and

generals, many massive demonstrations, violent upheavals, the dismissal of about 18000 oil workers from the parastatal PDVSA, and dozens of deaths for political reasons. President Chavez has consolidated power. Yet, he still alleges that the opposition, along with the US government, plots either a new coup or his assassination, whereas the opposition insists that Chavez's final aim is to impose an authoritarian socialism. Thus, political instability and polarization is far from ending.

The exact nature of the chavista regime is yet to be defined (Ellner and Hellinger 2003). The 1999 constitution makes clear that the Venezuelan regime is not a representative democracy, but a radical participatory regime (Alvarez 2003). The main features

<sup>12</sup> Note: CTV, Confederación de Trabajadores de Venezuela (Confederation of Venezuelan Workers) Source: Consejo Nacional Electoral (National Electoral Council)

(a) The recall referendum was certified as free and fair by international observers from the OAS and the Carter Center, but major opposition parties have refused to accept the results.

of the Bolivarian revolution include frequent and massive electoral mobilization; permanent political mobilization against alleged anti-revolutionary forcers – both domestic and foreign; restrictions of free speech; redistribution of rural and urban land property; and restriction of economic freedom.

Chavez has implemented a broad gamut of social programs, and has proclaimed that his ultimate goal is to re-invent socialism. He attempts to build a network of public-private partnership industries and farmer cooperatives that would not be profitable but “solidary”. The so-called “nucleuses of endogenous development” are the seeds of this allegedly new economic model. Chavez government is implementing a radical agrarian reform, has promoted the distribution of urban land (including illegal takeover of private buildings), and has declared that in Venezuelan private property is no longer “sacred.” Yet, paradoxically the private sector has grown after the critical years of 2001-2003. Thus far, Chavez’s “21st century socialism” seems to be a sort of radical populism (Ellner 2001). Chavez has concentrated power, has regulated the economy and has restricted civic rights. Yet, it is far from being a authoritarian socialism à la Cuba.

The Bolivarian revolution has based its legitimacy on successive electoral victories. In average, Chavez and his followers have run for and won more than one election per year (see Table 3). Venezuelans have cast their ballots in ten elections. Each one of them has been eventually presented as a revolutionary victory.

Nonetheless, opposition leaders and social organizations (labor unions, business federations, domestic and international NGOs and human rights groups) have claimed that Chavez’s revolution is a threat to democracy. The opposition distrusts political institutions – particularly, the National Electoral Council (CNE), the Supreme Court, and the General Prosecutor Office (Fiscalía). Opposition has complained of persecution and discrimination, and has demanded political liberalization, rule of law, and electoral transparency. Regardless of their many complaints, opposition candidates ran for any open office between 1999 and 2004, and ap-

parently will run for president in December 2006. The opposition boycotted the 2005 National Assembly election. However, this last-minute decision resulted from the combination of electoral calculations and regime strategies. Opposition leaders claimed that the government was ready to fraud. According to their arguments, the electoral authorities were able to make electronic vote-tracing, and the government was employing an electronic database to intimidate and to blackmail potential opponents – the so-called “Maisanta List” (2005). This list combined public information from the electoral register and the opposition signatures requesting the recall of the president and opposition representatives in the National Assembly. It included personal information on political preferences, previous voting behavior, identity numbers, addresses, and assigned polling stations. This list could probably have been used to distort voting decisions. Nonetheless, pre-election surveys predicted voters’ unwillingness to support opposition parties. According to Alfredo Keller and Assoc., the MVR was preferred by 55% of the voters who declared that they will surely vote, whereas the sum of the all opposition parties (AD, COPEI, PV, MPJ, ABB, UNT and LCR) was just 14%. The same firm estimated a turnout equal or minor to 30% (Keller 2005).

Nonetheless, that electoral boycott made explicit some dramatic implications of the current political game. As a result of the 2005 legislative election, the majority party (the MVR) and some of its allies (PPT, PODEMOS and PCV) gained 100% of the Congress seats, whereas opposition parties, which had about 45% of the seats in the former legislature, have no seats. Therefore, main opposition leaders have no access to crucial political information, no influence in the policy-making process and no parliamentary immunity for at least five years. They are making a less effective opposition, and they would be much more easily prosecuted and imprisoned by their political declarations and actions. However, opposition boycott revealed many flaws of the electoral systems that were detected by international observers. In a nutshell, in December 2005 the government won all the seats, but lost

some legitimacy, whereas the opposition lost all its power, but cast some shadows on the transparency of the Venezuelan electoral system.

### **The 2006 Presidential Election: challenges and dilemmas**

President Chavez has never concealed his electoral ambitions. Indeed, in his *Alo Presidente!* (Chavez's weekly live TV show) on February, 19 2006, the president voiced his willingness to remain in power indefinitely. The constitution allows him to run for president only for a second term, but his followers in the National Assembly have claimed that they are ready for a new constitutional reform.

Currently, Chavez has no serious challengers. In his coalition, Chavez is an uncontested leader. The Vice-President Jose Vicente Rangel and many other party leaders say that Chavez is the only necessary leader of the Bolivarian "process" (see Rangel 2004). Moreover, Chavez is currently the most preferred candidate. According to Alfredo Keller (2005) Chavez is supported by 55% of the voters, whereas the most popular of his opponents (Julio Borges, from MPJ) is backed by 10% of the citizens. Thus, Chavez will probably win with no effort. However, Chavez not only needs to win the elections, he requires massive support. His proclaimed goal is to gain 10 million votes out of a total 14 million potential voters. Thus, his most important enemy is not the opposition, but the abstention. The 2005 parliamentary elections demonstrated that his immense and expensive political apparatus (the so-called UBE, Unities of Electoral Battle) does not necessarily guarantee a massive turnout.

However, previous elections have taught him to take advantage of inflammatory and polarizing rhetoric. Since 1998, Venezuelan voters have turned out when the elections have been competitive and polarized. Thus, Chavez desperately will need a challenger if he wants to use the 2006 elections as a renew showcase for the legitimacy and strength of the Bolivarian revolution. Yet, opposition leaders and traditional parties are no longer a credible threat to Chavez's revolution.

The opposition leadership is weak and volatile. At least seven challengers are running for president.

Some of them might give up very soon, but probably some others will emerge. Opposition candidates are ideologically diverse. One of them, Teodoro Petkoff, is from the center-left. He is an economist and newspaper editor, who was a guerrilla leader in the 1960's, a former leader of a socialist party, and the Minister of Planning during the macroeconomic adjustment of 1996 to 1997. Another candidate, William Ojeda, is from a more radical and former *chavista* left-wing part (*Un Solo Pueblo*). The most right-wing candidate, Roberto Smith, is a technocrat mathematician who was a member of economic team that implemented a "shock-therapy" program during Carlos Andrés Pérez administration. Julio Borgers, is a lawyer and leader of the MPJ, and Manuel Rosales is currently a governor and the main leader of a regional and personalistic party, (*Nuevo Tiempo*). Petkoff and Ojeda have strongly criticized corruption, inefficiency and populism in Chavez administration, but both of them have remarked the relevance of Chavez' social reforms. They also have supported the ultra-nationalist foreign police of Hugo Chávez. On the other hand, Smith has emphasized the virtues of the orthodox economic policies. Borges and Rosales have said almost nothing about economics and social programs. However, Rosales explicitly supported the 2002 coup d'état led by powerful businessmen and right-wing military. Borges and Ojeda participated in demonstrations and popular upheavals in 2002 and 2003, whereas Petkoff and his newspaper (*Tal Cual*) condemned the coup, claimed for moderation, and proposed democratic ways out of the crisis. Borges is member of a national party, whereas the others are independent (Petkoff and Smith) or leaders of small personalistic parties (Rosales and Ojeda).

Most of these candidates have declared that the opposition should have only one candidate, but still they have found no solution to their problems of coordination. Since political parties are no longer able to enforce discipline and political agreements, these candidates have been exploring other institutional solutions. Some of them have proposed a primary election; some others prefer a national public

opinion poll. Nonetheless, they lack mechanism of coordination and enforcement of collective decisions. Thus, the more likely scenario is that, despite their efforts to coordinate, opposition leaders will run separately for the presidency.

Given the experience of December 2005, and the fact that they will unlikely coordinate a winning electoral strategy, they could eventually boycott the presidential election in a second attempt to expose the alleged undemocratic nature of the *chavista* regime. The National Assembly is about to elect new electoral authorities, but there is no reason to think that a single-party legislature will elect a more independent and trustworthy electoral council than the previous multi-party congress. Additionally, if the public opinion trends persist, opposition candidates will be inexorably defeated. Thus, once again, they may have incentives to boycott the election. In this scenario, Chavez will probably emphasize his already strong position on foreign policy issues and will make use of an even more radical “anti-imperialist” rhetoric. Lacking of a strong domestic menace, Chavez probably will need to fight against a powerful enemy. If he does not find a real threat, he seems to be able to fabricate one.

### Conclusions

This paper has shown that Venezuelan partyarchy collapsed in 1998 and was replaced by a personalistic, radical left-leaning leadership based on a looser organization. Chavez and his emerging MVR have exploited anti-system and nationalistic feelings. The *chavismo* have been depicted as a radical populist organization, which has emerged as a consequence of decisions made by a group of radical entrepreneurial politicians with military background, who adopted the rules of the democratic game after attempting two failed coups d'état that had given them a legitimate image of anti-system politicians. On the other hand, since 1998, the anti-*chavista* opposition has been an amalgam of decaying traditional mass-based parties, emerging personalistic leaderships, NGOs and traditional interest groups, which have faced important problems of coordination.

Since 1999, Chavez's movement and this hetero-

geneous opposition have played a complex and risky game. The government has used and will continue using competitive elections to legitimate Chavez's increasing concentration of power. The opposition has failed to cooperate, and will probably keep failing to build successful electoral coalitions. Opposition leaders have expected collective gains from cooperation against Chavez at the regime-game level, but in the electoral game each party has sought to maximize its vote share. President Chavez has been extremely successful in the electoral game. The government has become stronger, while the opposition gradually vanishes.

Yet, paradoxically, the government still needs the opposition to maintain domestic and international legitimacy. At the international level, competitive elections are nowadays the only legitimate way to make political reforms. International actors are currently more apt to avoid democratic breakdown than never before. The democratic chart of ASO is an example of this international commitment with democracy. At the domestic level, the government needs massive mobilization to legitimate the emerging political order. Electoral competition creates favorable conditions for massive turnout. Hence, the government dilemma has been and still is how to concentrate power to change the economic system and the political regime, without preventing the opposition form running in the elections.

The opposition leaders have faced a dilemma between cooperation against Chavez and competition between them. They have attempted to coordinate strategies to avoid the consolidation of the *chavista* regime, using both democratic methods and violent strategies (general strikes, military rebellion, and riots). Yet, they have been divided and will remain separated by ideological gaps and pragmatic conflicts for offices and leadership. In this context, Venezuela seems to transit via elections towards a hegemonic party system, where even the predominant party is not strong enough to check the President.

**Appendix 1:**

<b>Party label</b>	<b>Full party name</b>	<b>Year of Foundation</b>
PCV	Partido Comunista de Venezuela (Venezuelan Communist Party)	1931
AD	Acción Democrática (Democratic Action)	1939
COPEI	Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente. Partido Social Cristiano COPEI (since the 1980's)	1945
URD	Unión Republicana Democrática (Democratic Republican Union)	1947
MIR	Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (Revolutionary Left Movement)	1961
CCN	Cruzada Cívica Nacionalista (Nationalist Civic Crusade)	1963
MEP	Movimiento Electoral del Pueblo (People's Electoral Movement)	1968
MAS	Movimiento al Socialismo (Movement toward Socialism)	1971
PRV	Partido de la Revolución Venezolana (clandestine guerrilla facade)	1971
LCR	La Causa Radical (The Radical Cause)	1980
CONVERGENCIA	Convergencia Nacional (National Convergence)	
MBR-200	Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario 200 (clandestine military faction)	1983
PPT	Patria Para Todos (Homeland for All)	1997
PV	Proyecto Venezuela (Venezuelan Project)	1997
IRENE	Integración y Renovación Nueva Esperanza (New Hope Integration and Renovation)	
MVR	Movimiento Quinta República (Movement of the Fifth Republic)	1997
MPJ	Movimiento Primero Justicia	2000
EM	Electores Mirandinos	2000

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