

4 Has Venezuelan Decentralization Survived Chavismo?

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The article analyzes the recent phase of Venezuelan democracy, with a particular focus on the transformations and challenges related to decentralization. The development and proceedings of the movement around Chávez (*Chavismo*) and its connections to the political process are discussed, as well as certain aspects of populist political leadership and how these elements are related to (and in conflict with) the decentralization process. The populism and power concentration of the Chávez movement constitute a source of conflict for certain principles of decentralization. The decentralization process is emphasized as both a kind of historical context and a focus of analysis. The context of the article is the Venezuelan political party system, while decentralization constitutes the independent variable. It will be demonstrated that the Venezuelan two-party system had been undermined by the decentralization process already before the rise of Chavismo. Both Chavismo and a majority of the political opposition movements are thus rooted in the decentralization process itself.

Key words: decentralization, political parties, Chavismo, populism, Venezuela

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Este estudio analiza la época democrática moderna de Venezuela con un enfoque principal en las transformaciones relacionadas al proceso de la descentralización. El desarrollo y los avances del movimiento de Chávez (*el Chavismo*) y sus conexiones con el proceso político serán revisados analíticamente, así como ciertos aspectos de liderazgo y movimiento político populista, incluso sus elementos conflictivos con respecto al proceso de la descentralización. Desde ciertas perspectivas el populismo chavista y la concentración de poder constituyen una fuente conflictiva para ciertos principios democratizadores de la descentralización. Se enfatiza el proceso de la descentralización como fondo histórico y un tipo de delimitación del enfoque del estudio. La mayoría de los movimientos de la oposición (y del chavismo) tiene raíces en el proceso descentralizador. El enfoque contextual es el sistema político-partidista venezolano y la variable independiente es la descentralización. Se mostrará que el sistema bipartidista venezolano ya antes del auge de Chávez se había visto socavado por el proceso descentralizador.

Palabras claves: descentralización, partidos políticos, Chavismo, populismo, Venezuela.

Introduction

Decentralization is not meant to satisfy the bureaucratic appetites neither of political parties nor of pressure groups. Therefore, the best option is to create a new federalism. (...) The *Constituyente* [Constitutional revision] will create an impulse towards a new federalism that will guarantee the participation of the states, regions and municipalities (Hugo Chávez).¹

The most impacting political reform of modern democratic Venezuela was decentralization, implemented since 1989. Decentralization brought a deepening of democracy through the opening of the political system with the direct election of local and regional political authorities. As seen in the quotation above, as early as the electoral campaign of 1998, Hugo Chávez Frías was critical towards the functioning of decentralization and likewise he was rapidly accused of being the re-centralist option and the enemy of the decentralization process. This includes his questioning whether the autonomy of state and municipal governments is excessive. The new Constitution of 1999 was supposed to correct these defects along with some feudal legacies from the colonial tradition, and to make central government intervention in municipal and state territories easier.

In this essay, certain aspects of the destiny of Venezuelan decentralization since Chávez came to power will be revised. Most analysts have unfairly belittled the importance of the decentralization reform and its repercussions in Venezuelan politics and society. The decentralization processes from 1989 onwards brought with it a series of implications for the Venezuelan political and democratic system, including dramatic and profound changes in the party system, which experienced a transformation from a bipartisan system to multi-partyism during the first decade of a decentralized system, with significant changes in effective political contention between parties on distinct political-territorial levels. Since democratization in 1958, the political system has been dominated by two political parties, the social democratic AD (*Acción Democrática*)

and Christian democratic COPEI (*Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente*). Both AD and COPEI have by tradition been strongly centralized parties. Historically, these two parties have dominated national politics, often through strategic pacts and alliances. Between 1973 and 1988 these two together managed to capture between 80 and 93 percent of the vote in every presidential election. Since the late 1980's, however, this bipartisan hegemonic system, officially nominated partyarchy (*partidocracia*) has suffered an undermining and challenges from other political actors. Non-traditional political parties like the socialist MAS (*Movimiento Al Socialismo*) and Causa R (*Causa Radical*)² have emerged, also within the decentralization scheme. These parties have seen victories in several municipalities and federal states in the elections of mayors and governors respectively, thus threatening the almost hegemonic position of the two traditional parties (AD and COPEI). The municipal, regional and national elections of 1998 and 2000 changed the political panorama in Venezuela even more dramatically. Several entirely new political parties have emerged. The MVR (*Movimiento V República*) of current President Hugo Chávez Frías presents the most dramatic and rapid rise in this context. But similarly, parties associated with decentralization, like *Proyecto Venezuela*, with regional roots in the important industrial state of Carabobo, Leftist *Patria Para Todos* –PPT– (Fatherland For All) and the recently founded *Primero Justicia*, rooted in the Caracas area, are a few examples of parties that have achieved increased political influence.

Decentralization without doubt shook up the party system at all political-territorial levels. One additional objective of the reform was the democratization of the political parties. From that perspective, the link between decentralization and the transformation of the party system can be seen in an actual purpose of the reform. That is, changing

1 Interviewed in *El Universal*, 15 September 1998 (my italics).

2 Both MAS and Causa R were formed as consequences of a split in 1971 of the Venezuelan Communist Party –PCV – (*Partido Comunista de Venezuela*).

the party structures through political decentralization. The effective number and size of political parties have changed dramatically since decentralization was introduced, from the neighborhood level to the national. The political decentralization with direct elections of mayors and governors undermined the previous two-party hegemony, and manifested an evident pluralization and fragmentation of the Venezuelan party system. Or, as many social movement theorists argue, the political society suddenly became crowded with (too) many weak actors, in contrast to the previous experience of a few strong ones. The fragmentation level becomes even higher when the party composition at the municipal and regional state levels is included. This party system fragmentation stems from decentralization with the mere opening of the political and electoral system that the reforms implied. Notwithstanding, decentralization did not fulfill the most optimistic expectations, and corruption, clientelism and other irregularities at state and municipal levels remain as obstacles for the continuation of the process. The Chávez government also further accelerated the collapse of the previously dominating parties by cutting off all public economic support to parties. The victory of Chávez in 1998, as well as the splits of both traditional parties further evidenced the breakdown of Venezuela's political traditionalism.

From a stable partyarchy via decentralization to Chavismo

To understand the decline of AD-COPEI partyarchy and the eventual collapse of the traditional Venezuelan political system, it is important to follow the gradual changes from the 1980's. The deepening economic crisis without doubt debilitated these parties and their capacity to satisfy sectorial interests. Decentralization was introduced in the Latin American countries in the midst of economic decline and crisis. The continental economic crisis of the 1980's affected Venezuela also, even more with declining oil prices on the world market, and since the political establishment could not satisfy societal sectors as before, social and political discontent started to increase. Corruption among politicians and business leaders worsened the situation, and opposition

politicians as well as academics and "ordinary citizens" blamed the former for the almost universally decreasing socio-economic conditions. A credibility crisis in relation to the political leadership deepened, and to confront this situation a commission for political and administrative reform initiated its work in 1984, with government decentralization as a key ingredient. Formal decentralization in Venezuela was to be implemented in three steps: political, administrative and fiscal, beginning with the political and finishing with the fiscal. The Venezuelan decentralization has been without doubt one of the more successful in the continent and the most powerful as to immediate political impacts.

An analysis through the rear-view mirror reveals that the decentralization reforms had semi-suicidal results for the traditional authorities, AD and COPEI, even though they continued to maintain a relatively dominant position during the first years of the decentralized system. It is relevant to recall that the two parties suffered from a pressing credibility crisis, which also contributed to factional divisions within the parties between reformers and conservatives. The factionalism within AD eventually proved to be decisive for the decision-making processes before the decentralization reforms. The decision within AD to promote eventual political decentralization was the result of political manipulations by Carlos Andrés Pérez (CAP), who used decentralization to eliminate rivalry and complications and the other faction within the AD party. At the same time, decentralization was considered a compromise with the opposition parties that were demanding political representation on the regional and local levels, not only leftists MAS and Causa R, but also COPEI, which were calculating the probabilities of electoral triumphs on the regional and local political levels. In all this, I am not stating that AD as a unified solid bloc at any time accepted and promoted decentralization. The second governments of CAP (1989-1993) and Rafael Caldera (1994-1998) were characterized by neo-liberal approaches. Pérez did, however, accelerate decentralization during his term, though pressed by the social perceptions of betrayal and disillusion manifested through the Ca-

Caracazo riots in 1989 and the attempted coups d'état in 1992.

The Venezuelan political society experienced a deepening crisis of party identification between 1984 and 1994. The period following 1989 also indicates the preference for a new kind of leadership, with anti-party leaders such as Hugo Chávez, a pattern that goes back to the post-colonial experiences and the *caudillismo* system. The popular disenchantment was also reflected in the local and regional elections for governors and mayors. The changes related to decentralization and the opening of the political gates to the State and the political system also contributed to the undermining of partyarchy. Decentralization in Venezuela affected political opportunities and openings for all political parties, but in different ways. For the traditionally super-centralized parties AD and COPEI, the changes in internal party structure had already begun in the 1980's with the development of neighborhood associations, which were flourishing during the decade and contributed to modifications of party stands, especially within AD. Within opposition parties, pressure for decentralization reforms accelerated during the 1980's. In the midst of this tense situation of constant conflict, the Venezuelan crisis did not start with, nor will it end with, Chávez. Ever since the 1970's a struggle for a deepening of democracy and a confrontation with the AD-COPEI partyarchy has been developing. Chávez was successful in capitalizing on the growing social and political discontent with the traditional political parties as he promised to get rid of the corrupt politicians and the poverty-related problems of the nation. Chávez also promised a model of a more participatory democracy, with greater social inclusion.

With a focus on decentralization, three main empirical periods can be discerned in Venezuelan democratic history since 1958. First is the centralized party-State model concentrated in AD and COPEI, that is, partyarchy. Second is the process of decentralization and political pluralization between 1989 and 1998. The third period is the Fifth Republic with the Chávez government since 1999, in which traits of a re-centralization of political powers

have been apparent. Nonetheless, even though the former COPEI-leader Rafael Caldera won in 1993 and Chávez in 1998 and 2000, the strength of the advances of decentralization has been apparent in the internal party structures and the party system as a whole. The victory of Caldera in the wake of the *Caracazo*³ riots and the two coup attempts reflected the population's dissatisfaction and its will to punish the politicians guilty of the crisis. This disenchantment and tendency towards vengeance on the part of the electorate merits even greater attention in the analyses of the triumphs of Chávez, which also need to take into consideration the Venezuelan populist and *caudillismo* traditions. Regarding the position of Chávez on decentralization, he opposes the neo-liberal and bureaucratic duplication aspects of decentralization and centralist traits have been apparent during his years in power.

Decentralization, party system and chavismo

It is not a secret to anybody that Chávez is the one who exercises absolute personal control over MVR (Rey, 2002: 19).

A few aspects of this political-cultural change in behavior on the part of the Venezuelan electorate are still worth remarking on. Decentralization has contributed to possibilities of vote splitting and the electorate has learned to value persons or projects rather than political parties at all political-territorial levels. The appearance of the political movement around Hugo Chávez could at a first glance seem like a return to party control of the political system, considering the strength and more and more dominant position of MVR between 1999 and 2006. However, the victories of MVR on all political-territorial levels have more to do with

3 Further, many academics, politicians and ordinary citizens still maintain that without fraudulent electoral behavior and sabotage, Causa R and its presidential candidate Andrés Velásquez would have won in 1993. Causa R might have been the most popular party at the time, and the party enjoyed high media attention and coverage. Velásquez was recognized mainly for his merits as governor of the important state of Bolívar.

the concentration of power and popular belief (or hope for change) in the person of Chávez than with preference for a certain political party or ideology. That is, the popularity of Chávez, especially in 1998 and 1999, was also a serious manifestation of hope for change and the belief that a strong charismatic leader (Chávez) was needed to change the political culture, and even former AD and COPEI militants have confessed giving their votes to Chávez in 1998 (Lalander, 2004 a: 242-243). Nevertheless, regarding the strong power concentration in one person, debates on the need for internal party decentralization have been going on MVR since 1999. The issue constitutes a delicate and difficult dilemma on how to balance centralization with political-territorial autonomy, very likely (and repeatedly proven) a constant source of internal conflicts within the party. The popular will for political change and the disillusionment with the political traditionalism in relation to the Chávez movement goes back to the second government of CAP and the popularity of Causa R in the 1993 elections. Many of the Venezuelans who voted for Causa R in 1993 gave their votes to Chávez in 1998 and 2000 (that is, they changed their preference from the decentralist option to a pronounced centralist alternative (albeit under the banner of a participatory democracy).

Now, as a direct result of the popular referenda on the new constitution in 1999, elections of executive and legislative authorities were planned, including re-elections of those authorities that were elected in 1998. Due to the separation of the regional elections from the presidential ones in 1998, Hugo Chávez and MVR considered these elections to be non-representative. Neither AD nor COPEI participated with a proper presidential candidate before the new elections in 2000. After the humiliation of the 1998 presidential election, AD and COPEI had been almost politically extinguished. Worth mentioning in this context is that the Chávez government also accelerated the collapse of the traditional parties by cutting off all public economic support to political parties.

Before the mega-elections in 2000, the strongest rival to Chávez was his former soul- arms- and jail-

brother, *Comandante* Arias Cárdenas, presented by the Causa R party and supported by a number of smaller parties (and also by *ex-adecos* and *ex-copeyanos*). Arias also had the support of several governors from various political parties, who argued that Arias as president would support continued decentralization and dialogue. Nevertheless, after a dirty campaign Chávez managed to triumph by a large margin, 56 percent of the votes compared with 37 percent for Arias. During the mega-electoral campaign, one of the parties that suffered from most dramatic turmoil was the PPT, which under noisy circumstances eventually withdrew from the Patriotic Pole backing Chávez. President Chávez self-confidently responded that he did not need the support of the PPT, and furthermore he felt sure that a lot of the PPT grassroots militants would still vote for him in the presidential elections (Medina, 2001: 176-178). This last statement of Chávez can be interpreted as a kind of recognition of decentralization on behalf of the president (and at the time presidential candidate). That is, from the perspective of vote splitting between the political-territorial entities. Similarly, Chávez's skeptical view of political party loyalty can be discerned in the announcement.

Re-centralization and de-partidization with the Chávez government?

Everything is relative, the political party is always [inevitable], when functioning as an instrument of political organization, of participation, a space for discussion, for analysis and generator of ideologies, the generation of politics, and always if internal democracy is practiced, consulting, tolerance, in which ethical values predominate, then [the party] is unavoidable [*imprescindible*]. Now then, if we deal with an organized minority, with iron-rigid discipline and a vertical mode of functioning, where other interests predominate, personal or group, they [the parties] are rather an obstacle for democracy (Chávez, in Díaz Rangel, 2002: 119).

The personalization and concentration of political power in one person avoids the traditional

institutionalized ways of doing politics, often with support by the popular masses. Another important characteristic of these anti-politics and neo-populist approaches in the case of *Chavismo* has been the use of media, especially television. In Venezuela, Hugo Chávez has taken more advantage of television than any other previous president, which has evidently been decisive for his support and the development of a plebiscitary democracy (Ramos Jiménez, 2000: 24). In a more extreme form, populist plebiscitary leadership can be classified as a leadership without parties, to be compared with democratic leadership, which according to liberal pluralists in general will always be a leadership with political parties. Nevertheless, it has to be emphasized that the great majority of Venezuelan television channels and newspapers are associated with forces behind the current opposition, and particularly since 2001 these media forums have been used for political purposes. On the one hand, the opposition controls the major part of the media, but on the other, Chávez came to power and remains there. As radical Bolivarian politician Lina Ron states on the matter of the powerful private media:

For the first time in their life, the [private] mass media, that always placed and withdrew Presidents, have failed with us. They are not infallible, they are not invincible, they are attackable, possible to destroy, they have run out of reasons and they are running out of the power they previously had. (Murieta, 2003: 62)⁴

The popularity of Chávez and the manifest anti-party and anti-establishment strategies can be considered a kind of re-centralization of the political system and a type of shrinkage of democratic space through the partial exclusion of political parties. This new situation can also of course be interpreted as a return to Latin American populist tradition with respect to the leader-masses relationship. Like other populist leaders in the continent (e.g., in Peru and Ecuador), Chávez himself has confessed that he strives for a political system in which the political parties have less importance, in politics and in society as a whole.

I do not lie awake at night for any political party; my sleep is disturbed by the organization of the popular movement. ... The parties ought to be the expression of that popular movement, they should be the channels of participation and of influence for the organized popular movement, but they should not be able to hegemonize it. If they do not function, well, the popular movement should sweep them away.... The parties for me are like fairy tales (Chávez, in Lopez Maya, 2003: 182).

These anti-party expressions are typical traits of the neo-populist “anti-politics” and “anti-traditional-parties” approaches that have appeared during the 1990’s in Latin America. A research report on parliamentary elites in Latin America confirms the ambiguous position of *Chavismo* towards the mere existence of political parties as key institutions for democracy. According to the study, 52 percent of the MVR National Assembly deputies consider that democracy would function without political parties. This figure contrasts brutally with those from opposition parties, with AD presenting 6 percent of deputies believing in democracy without parties, 25 percent in MAS, 19 percent in COPEI, and 25 percent in Proyecto Venezuela. The question of the preference for democracy as a political system has also been investigated. According to the figures, in MVR the support for democracy as a system is 84 percent, whereas 16 percent prefer another form of government. Even if the pro-democracy percentage is indeed high, it is to be compared with 100 percent support for democracy in AD, MAS, COPEI and Proyecto Venezuela (Molina, 2003: 9).⁵

The general political atmosphere has likewise been rather confusing and uncertain at times, maybe even more so for the Leftists who were previously allied with *Chavismo*. Socialist MAS has experienced several divisions since 1998. One group of dissidents formed the *Izquierda Democrática*

4 Lina Ron has left the MVR and formed her own party, Unión Popular Venezolana –UPV– (Popular Venezuelan Unity), since Chávez and MVR considered her too uncontrollable. She remains chavista and Bolivarian, though, as do the majority of her UPV comrades.

5 A 47 % of MVR’s eighty deputies were interviewed in July 2003.

– ID – (Democratic Left) in 1999. Another split of MAS occurred in 2002, resulting in two parties with the same name, but with *oficialista* (officialist) added to the name (*MAS-oficialista*) of the MAS faction tied to the Chávez government. The other MAS faction (popularly known as the MAS-MAS⁶), led by Leopoldo Pucchi, who in 1998-99 had been the closest to Chávez of all MAS leaders, joined the fragmented opposition, also in the National Assembly. The relationship between MAS and the government had already worsened by October 2001. In a public speech Chávez stated, “The people of MAS are definitively no allies of this process. I ask them to take their suitcases and to leave, because we do not need them. *Rather, they are hindering us*” (Bolívar, 2002: 134).

Summing up the present political panorama from the perspective of Leftist parties in the context of decentralization and the party system, Venezuela presents a most interesting case of political polarization, with left-wing (and decentralist) parties in both opposition and government. In the present political polarization, the Venezuelan party system can no longer that easily be measured and analyzed through a study of the Left-Right political continuum, although Chávez has indeed managed to unite Leftist movements as never before in modern democratic Venezuela. The allies of Chavismo have organized in a common command group (*Comando Ayacucho*), among others to collaborate before the regional and local elections of 2004. Among the opposition parties, Causa R is accompanied by decentralist movements such as Primero Justicia, Proyecto Venezuela, Queremos Elegir, Un Sólo Pueblo, Alianza Bravo Pueblo and even the “new decentralist generation” of *adecos and copeyanos*. Within *Chavismo* too, decentralization is accepted as the new rules of the political game, although with some particular reservations in the case of the MVR.

Decentralization and the challenges of bureaucracy and corruption

As mentioned, Chávez and *Chavismo* aimed at constructing a new model of decentralized government, but they failed in clearing up the administration of

public servants with links to the traditional parties. Quite early it was manifest that the *chavista* movement in itself lacked the necessary party tightness, with competent and disciplined cadres ready to fill the mid-level gaps in the institutional bureaucracy and thereby be able to guarantee greater efficiency and the purge of irregularities. Furthermore, after the central government initiated checks of possible inefficiency and irregularities at state and municipal government levels, *Chavismo* became an easy target for charges of being obstructionist towards decentralization (Ellner, 2001: 19). Paradoxically, the attitudes of vengeance within the MVR grassroots took on extreme dimensions; practically everything that might be reminiscent of the old-regime politics was condemned, and this contributed to clientelistic behavior among MVR members. As Steve Ellner describes it, the argument of a definitive break-up with the political past evidently served to justify the pressure to “clean out” AD and COPEI militants from public administration, which opened political opportunities for MVR militants (Ibid: 15). Speaking of corruption associated with Chavismo, Lina Ron reveals that the anti-corruption commando that was created by Chávez in 1998 failed in fulfilling its objectives. The chief of the commando was Edison Contreras, popularly named *caza-corruptos* (“corrupt-hunter”).

I’m gonna tell you something, and they will get mad at me, but I tell you: They asked Contreras: Contreras, why haven’t you caught any corrupted people? And he answered: because if I did we would end up without comrades (Ron, in: Murieta, 2003: 91-92).

Furthermore, Hugo Chávez (2004) confesses that corruption, bureaucracy and institutional inefficiency still constitute the main obstacles for societal progress, although he adds that it is the heritage of the old AD-COPEI regime and that his government already is advancing in this struggle (Chávez, 2004). The reinforcement of the central executive

6 The officialist MAS then registered under the name of Podemos, and the other (opposition) party remains as MAS.

of the government can be interpreted as a re-centralization of State power, and thus a continuation and deepening of the centralist tradition. In Latin American delegative democracies, a common phenomenon in the decision-making and legislative processes has been that of *decretismo*, that is, the president passes laws by decree (O'Donnell, 1994: 66-67) – in Venezuela a heavy presidential tradition, particularly since the first government of Carlos Andrés Pérez in 1974-78. Most probably, this system constitutes an obstacle to efficient and effective decentralization and to the possibilities for local and regional political leaders to do politics.

Deconcentration or decentralization?

From certain perspectives, the populism and power concentration of Chávez constitutes a source of conflict for the democratization principles of decentralization. But at the grassroots level, MVR and *Chavismo* introduced a counter-movement (years before Chávez came to power), “the Bolivarian Circles” (*Círculos Bolivarianos*), against the traditional political parties and civil society organizations.⁷ Every little group at base level should be able to form a circle, as Chávez puts it, every fishing boat, every neighborhood block should get together and discuss politics in the Bolivarian spirit. For this purpose, local assemblies were organized. The militants of MBR-200⁸ sought to train the circle members with study courses in national and international history. The idea was that frequent discussions on politics would help to overcome difficulties related to political inexperience and military rigidity. But conflicts emerged frequently between civilians and military people, on political leadership style, for instance. In an interview made in 2002, President Chávez expresses his view on decentralization and its relationships with the national political plans:

A contradiction is produced and it is necessary to look for a solution, and the only possible one is established in our Constitution, or at least one of the solutions. That is democratic, participatory planning and open discussion. They have accused us of being enemies of

[de] centralization,* but really we are not, but indeed we are against the disintegrating decentralization. One of the five strategic axes of the national development project is precisely the deconcentrated decentralization. That is, we add the word deconcentrated to the concept of decentralization within the federal model (Chávez, in Harnecker, 2002: 55).

Now, decentralization can be related theoretically and conceptually to deconcentration, since both systems refer to a transfer of powers (e.g., from national to regional or local level). However, deconcentration concerns the process through which the national central government is present *in* local and/or regional entities. Decentralization, on the other hand, refers to the transfer of services, competencies and resources from the central, national government to the local communities and/or the regions. Delegation, sometimes also confused with decentralization, can be defined as the time-limited assignation of functions to an entity having a different juridical nature. The signification of decentralization is often better understood in a comparison with its' opposite: centralization. Decentralization can be perceived as the antithesis of centralization, but practically speaking, probably neither a totally centralized nor a totally decentralized system would function, at least not well enough to deserve to be

7 For an official presentation of the Bolivarian Circles, see: www.circulosbolivarianos.org. Anti-chavistas have renamed these organizations the “Terror Circles” (*Círculos de Terror*), claiming that the circles are provided with arms by the government for military preparedness purposes. These accusations are firmly rejected by both Chávez and the circles at the grassroots level.

8 The Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement-200, MBR-200 (Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario –200) was formed as a civic-military movement in 1983 by Hugo Chávez and other midlevel military men, and the name alludes to the 200th anniversary of the birth of Liberator Simón Bolívar. The political approach of MBR-200 can be described as nationalist and populist in its anti-establishment strategies. Officially the program of the movement is based on “Bolivarianism” (the ideas of Bolívar). To be able to compete in the elections of 1997, MBR-200 registered as a political party in 1997, under the name of Movimiento Quinta República (MVR), although MBR-200 has remained as an internal group within MVR.

* A typing or transcription error appears in the material of Harnecker. It is obvious that Chávez is speaking about decentralization and not centralization.

called a system. Decentralization is thus more a process than a system and is also so multi-dimensional that it functions theoretically rather as an umbrella term to cover the descriptions of various processes (Lalander, 2004 a: 74-75). If we recall the theoretical differences between decentralization and deconcentration in the context of the position towards decentralization of the Constitutional Assembly deputies, of whom a majority of *Chavismo* representatives declared themselves against the maintenance of autonomy for the governorships. Deconcentration signifies the transference of government institutions from the national center to lower political-territorial levels of government, but still controlled from the center. In this case it would imply a return to the old Venezuelan system of directly appointed governors.

President Chávez has thus repeatedly been classified as a centralist political leader. In theory, though, Hugo Chávez has not been opposed to decentralization as a deepening of democracy and access to the political and State arenas. On the other hand, he took issue with some arguments and significances of decentralization, regarding them as a smokescreen for neo-liberal reforms as well as the institutional excesses and duplication of bureaucracy. As Steve Ellner argues, the problem was that for a participatory democracy to work (a basic requirement if decentralization is to really function well), a thriving civil society is needed. In the eyes of the chavistas, such a civil society was linked to the Fourth Republic (the AD-COPEI partyarchy). Therefore they felt obliged to create a new civil society from above. This was not likely to happen, though, at least not in one blow. The issue of decentralization was indeed complicated. Chávez was critical of it not because he supported the partyarchy as a model but because it had contributed in many ways to the types of neo-liberal policies that he opposed (Ellner, personal communication; Lalander, 2004 a & b).

Participatory democracy and the deconcentrated decentralization, according to Chávez and *Chavismo*, should thus take place on the municipal and neighborhood levels (this could also be seen in the previously shown survey of inclination towards

decentralization). Chávez indeed confesses that a central element of *Chavismo's* kind of decentralization is precisely the deconcentration of political, economic and social power. He refers to other models of decentralization as neo-liberal, with the creation of power centers in the governorships. Like Caldera, who earlier criticized the governors for assuming excessive power in their regions, Chávez too is skeptical and calls them "true local *caudillos*, absolute owners of regional powers" (Harnecker, 2002: 55). As early as the electoral campaign of 1998, Chávez was accused of being the re-centralist option and the enemy of the decentralization process. Julio Borges (2003), of the opposition party *Primero Justicia*, describes the most recent transformation of the Venezuelan party system:

In this scenario, as a response to the crisis of the parties, new leaderships emerged; some of them came precisely from the decentralization; others offered a magical formula for the imposition of order.

Both a kind of populism (or Messianism as many analysts prefer) and the decentralization process should be the keys to understanding the transformation of the party system. It is also clear that in this context one process or movement does not develop and act alone without being affected by other developments and movements. Rounding off, Chávez has not killed the Venezuelan partyarchy, and neither did Caldera before him. The old elephants practically committed political suicide in promoting and accepting decentralization as the new set of rules for the political game (Lalander, 2004 a: 286), in the same process opening the doors to challengers outside the decentralization scheme.

The future of decentralization in Venezuela

What prospects for the future, then, could be given for the decentralization reforms in Venezuela? There is no doubt that citizens and political actors have started to take advantage of the political, institutional and practical possibilities that the decentralized type of democracy offers, manifest among other things in vote splitting, and which have been

(and remain) reflected in the party system. Municipal and regional political authorities, principally the mayors and the governors, are generally recognized and have demanded (with different outcomes) the transfer of authorities, responsibilities and rights from central political control. Likewise, it is important to underline that the Venezuelan people seem to be satisfied with the changes related to decentralization. José Molina shows that the great majority of Venezuelans have a positive attitude towards decentralization (Molina, 2000: 14).⁹ In the context of the current political situation of the Chávez government, research on Venezuelan public opinion and political culture reveals that the majority of people, including those in the Chavismo movement, defend the existing decentralization system (Carrasquero & Welsch, 1999: 43-44). But, a relatively large number of *Chavismo* politicians are in favor of abolishing the autonomy of the governorships, while at the same time they promote increased authorities for the municipal level. It is also noteworthy that during the electoral campaigns of 1999 and 2000, practically all candidates (including President Chávez) presented themselves as the defenders of the “adequate” continuation of the decentralization processes. Decentralization has been included in the discourses of all political parties and leaders (Lalander, 2004 a & b; de la Cruz, 2004). Even if decentralization has caused conflicts and controversies (as all kinds of power transfer do), a great majority of the local, regional and national political leaders consider decentralization irreversible. Another relevant factor that speaks in favor of the decentralized system is the strong identification of Venezuelans with their particular regional state.

From certain perspectives, it could be easy to reach the conclusion that centralization, first under Caldera and then under Chávez, seems to demonstrate that the tradition of centralism in Venezuela is still alive and well. But this can perhaps be traced rather to socio-economic factors than to tradition. Decentralization has accentuated social differences since the creation of new municipalities such as Chacao, Baruta, and elsewhere, which meant fewer resources for big cities and a privileged status for

those living in the “suburbs.” On the other hand, decentralization has stimulated the advent of a regional leadership, which became relatively independent (even if the political parties, both traditional and new, continued to dominate politics) (Ellner, personal communication; Lalander, 2004 a).

Though decentralization was blocked during the Caldera government and political centralism became further concentrated with the installation and development of the Chávez government, there have been signs of attempts to create functioning channels between the center and the regions. In January 2000, the Federal Council of Government –CFG– (*Consejo Federal del Gobierno*) was officially introduced. Governors and mayors were to be integrated within the CFG so they could share their experiences. The CFG is presided over by the Vice-President of the Republic (who is appointed by the President) and is further composed, according to the law, of the cabinet ministers, the governors, one mayor per federal entity and representatives of civil society. The CFG aims to provide a form for “coordination” in which plans are discussed among representatives of the different levels of government. Angel Alvarez suggests that the CFG is one of the most important innovations of the new constitution. Within *Chavismo*, the CFG has provoked emphatically opposed standpoints. On the one hand, National Assembly deputy Alejandro de Armas has struggled for tighter boundaries between the executive and legislative bodies, opposing centralized budget control in favor of increased financial autonomy for the states. On the other hand, former vice-president of the Republic Adina Bastidas proposed a model for reinforcing central State control over expenditures at regional and municipal levels. Likewise, Bastidas attempted to institutionally abolish the Inter-Governmental Decentralization Fund/FIDES (Alvarez,

9 One question in the survey was: “Another topic under discussion is decentralization and the leadership and government of the governors and the mayors. Do you think that decentralization has been: (1) very good (10.2%); (2) good (62.8%); (3) bad (22.8%); (4) very bad (4.2%) for the country? Valid cases: 1,311. (Ibid.) See also González de Pacheco, 2000; Lalander, 2004 a; de la Cruz, 2004.

2003: 156-157). The basic system of the CFG and its functions was first introduced with the *Ley Organica de Coordinacion del Situado Constitucional* of 1975, which was abolished by the Decentralization Law (LODDT) of 1989. This was the model that Chávez supported (Ellner, personal communication). However, governors and mayors from the opposition have criticized the CFG, arguing that it is a step backwards towards (re) centralization.

Chavismo and decentralization since 2004

The centralization-decentralization aspect of the entire political party system, however, remains central and likewise contradictory in the analysis of the present and forthcoming panorama of the Venezuelan political system, contradictory not only due to the ambiguous position of Chávez and *Chavismo* towards decentralization and the party system, but also with respect to the structure of the “new” political parties most associated with decentralization. I refer to the personalization ingredient of the parties. That is, even if parties like Primero Justicia, Proyecto Venezuela-Carabobo and Causa R promote a deepening of decentralized democracy, they are strongly identified with their national leaders (Julio Borges and Gerardo Blyde in Primero Justicia, Salas Römer and Salas Feo in Proyecto Venezuela, and Andrés Velásquez in Causa R). At the same time, though, this could be considered a consequence of the media coverage and its concentration on the national leaders of each party. Likewise, it is worth recalling that all of the national party leaders mentioned initially emerged through the decentralization process.

In terms of party system, in 2004 Venezuela almost approaches a one-party-system, although it is worth remarking that the officialist political movement is constituted by at least three strong parties. Furthermore, when the distinct political-territorial levels are included, as well as the parliamentary distribution of seats, Venezuela remains multi-partisan, notwithstanding with a strong dominant position of MVR and allies at the regional level. The *Chavismo* alliance triumphed in 21 of the 23 regional states, and MVR saw the victory in 193 of the 332 municipalities in 2004.¹⁰ However, in the regional strong-

holds of the opposition, like the states of Carabobo, Yaracuy and Miranda, the differences between the candidates were indeed minimal, but finally the National Electoral Council proclaimed the triumph of the chavista candidates in the three states. The opposition alliance (*la Coordinadora Democrática*) was dissolved after these elections, and the Chavismo alliance –the Patriotic Pole– was transformed into the “Bloc of Change” (*Bloque del Cambio*). Several chavistas consider that with the landslide victory in the regional elections of 2004, a cycle is closed, initiated in 1989 with the *Caracazo* riots. In the municipal elections of 2005, MVR obtained a 58 % of the posts. But, through the parliamentary elections of December 2005, the *chavista* alliance got in charge of a 100 % of the National Assembly seats, to certain degree due to a boycott of the election on behalf of most opposition parties, thus with this focus Venezuela could qualify for a mono-party-system at the parliamentary level.¹¹ Immediately after the presentation of these results, opposition leader María Corina Machado concluded that:

From a pluripartisan parliament we arrive in a mono-partisan one that does not represent a broad sector of the population. Today a National Assembly wounded in legitimacy is born (Globovision, 2005).¹²

At the same time there are analysts (like the author of this article) who are of the opinion that the political opposition indeed exists (and has always existed in post-1958 Venezuela), but speaking of the current opposition, demotivated and frequently confused and characterized by a severe error in its ways of dedicating so much strength only in criticizing Chávez and to internal fights. The discourses of the majority of the opposition parties have been

10 The strongest Chavismo allies were: PPT (17 mayoralties) and Podemos (10). AD only obtained 38 mayoralties, COPEI 18, and Convergencia 5. Likewise, Chavismo triumphed in the Super-Mayorality of Caracas, with Juan Barreto of MVR.

11 The Chavismo alliance controls the Assembly, and the MVR party is represented by 114 deputies of the totally 167 seats.

12 Machado interviewed in: Globovisión 4th of December, 2005. www.globovision.com

concentrated in the actions and pronouncements of President Chávez, to such extent that from this perspective Chávez could be classified as the actual leader – or anti-leader- of the present Venezuelan opposition. Nevertheless, rounding off the analysis, the possibly strongest presidential candidate of the present opposition before the elections in December 2006 is Manuel Rosales,¹³ most of all recognized for his merits as mayor of oil metropolis Maracaibo and thereafter governor of the important Zulia state, once again emphasizing the importance of the Venezuelan decentralization.

Final remarks

Some of the most skeptical critics of both *Chavismo* and decentralization would say that the former has definitively extinguished the latter. I do not agree; as demonstrated, the decentralized framework is still functioning and continues to have impacts on the party system as well as the way of doing politics at all political territorial levels. Despite his being classified as a centralist political leader, Chávez and *Chavismo* have recognized decentralization as a system, but in need of modifications, including a suggested withdrawal of power from the governors. Furthermore, it has been emphasized that *Chavismo* is proposing a deconcentrated model of decentralization, that is, with a stronger control from the central political level. Likewise, as has been mentioned, certain aspects of the populism and power concentration of *Chavismo* constitutes a source of conflict (and a threat) for the democratization principles of decentralization. A continuation of the populist model of political leadership could implicate a prolonged weakening of civil society and of the democratic space for mobilization. Notwithstanding, I do not aim at stating that all populisms are always bad. In times of credibility crisis and political disillusion on behalf of the citizens -with the inbuilt repercussions in form of obstacles for governability- a populist leader (or movement) could emerge and (re-) motivate citizens' belief in democracy and politics. That is, if the populism wakes up the conscience and will for political participation among the citizens within a democratic scheme, then fa-

vourable factors can indicate toward the legitimacy and democratic functioning of populism during a period of time. However, within a longer perspective, populism and its anti-parliamentary traits constitute a clear threat to democracy and decentralization.

Notwithstanding, the symbolic value of the new leaderships and the consequences derived from decentralization for the legitimacy of the political system are often mentioned as one of the most evident positive results of decentralization. Citizens and organizations have gained better channels for political participation in the public sector. Generally speaking, what might be promising for the future is that practically all the major political actors present themselves as defenders of decentralization as a political and governmental model. Variations do however exist among parties and politicians about how the divisions of power and economic resources should be distributed. Decentralization has thus contributed to democratic improvements, but also to complications and confusions, with a duplication of bureaucracy and possibilities of clientelistic behaviour, vices that still burden Venezuelan society and politics.

13 Rosales was previously an AD militant, but formed his new regional party Un Nuevo Tiempo (A New Time). By August 2006 Rosales was officially backed-up by several of the other presidential candidates of the opposition, among others Julio Borges (Primero Justicia) and former MAS leader Teodoro Petkoff. Likewise many AD leaders and militants support the candidature of Rosales.

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