Venezuelan Leftist Parties in the Era of Hugo Chávez

Rickard Lalander

Abstract: In this article the roots, development and the current situation of the political movement around Venezuelan President Hugo Rafael Chávez Fria (Chavismo) are analyzed through historical reconsiderations regarding the main Leftist political parties of the country. Many scholars have tended to neglect important historical connections between, for instance, Chavismo and Venezuelan historical Leftist parties. Conflict and change in and around Chavismo principally from the early 1990’s onwards are factors to be explored in a context of Venezuelan democracy and leftist political actors, both those associated with Chávez and those actors of the present and recent political opposition. Likewise, the personalistic character of Chavismo and its possible implications for the party system and individual parties are considered.

Keywords: Venezuela – Hugo Chávez – Chavismo – Political party system – Leftist parties

Resumen: En este artículo se analizan las raíces, así como el desarrollo y la situación actual del movimiento político alrededor del Presidente venezolano Hugo Rafael Chávez Fria (Chavismo) a través de consideraciones históricas sobre los partidos políticos izquierdistas del país. Muchos académicos han ignorado la importancia de conexiones históricas entre, por ejemplo, el Chavismo y los partidos políticos más históricos de la izquierda. Se analizarán aspectos de conflicto y cambio por dentro y fuera del Chavismo en el contexto de la democracia venezolana y los actores políticos de izquierda, tanto los que han estado asociados al movimiento de Chávez, como los de la presente y reciente oposición política. Asimismo, se consideran el carácter personalista del Chavismo y sus posibles implicaciones para el sistema partidista y los partidos políticos individuales.

Palabras claves: Venezuela – Hugo Chávez – Chavismo – Sistema de partidos políticos – Partidos izquierdistas
Introduction

The victory of Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías in the presidential elections of December 6th 1998 signified a definitive rupture of the traditional Venezuelan political party system. Since democratization in 1958, two political parties - the social democratic AD (Acción Democrática) and the Christian democratic COPEI (Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente) - had shared an almost hegemonic position in national politics. Between 1968 and 1988, Venezuela was considered one of the most stable political party systems of Latin America, particularly from the perspective of democratic pluralism. The political party of Chávez, Fifth Republic Movement/MVR (Movimiento V República), has been Venezuela’s strongest political party force since 1999. Notwithstanding, Chávez has strived to create a political system in which the political parties have less importance, in both politics and society as a whole. Chávez, re-elected President in 2000 and 2006, has not aimed at institutionalizing a strong political party organization (at least not until 2006).

From a continental perspective, Hugo Chávez has functioned as a pioneer, catapulting the so-called leftist transformation of Latin America. His rise to power in 1998 signaled that the pattern of neo-liberal governments in Latin America was broken. Few analysts believed then that the Chavismo movement would evolve into a new alternative to neo-liberalism on the continent. Since seizing power, Chávez has constituted a challenge for scholars who have tried to classify his political project in terms of leftist or rightist traits. Only recently -since 2005- has the Chávez government itself classified the transformation of Venezuela as a socialist project.

In the same spirit, Chávez has spearheaded the creation of a new socialist party: the Unified Socialist Party of Venezuela/PSUV (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela), a project involving the dissolution of all the parties of the hitherto government alliance. In this article a number of analytical reflections will be presented, starting with the Venezuelan political party system, the perspective of President Hugo Chávez and the movement around him (Chavismo), as well as the leftist political parties in the current opposition. The roots of Chavismo are analyzed from a historical perspective. Certain historical factors (mainly actors) are emphasized in order to better comprehend the development of Chavismo. The author will however not thoroughly define or sort out the concepts and characteristics of being Left (or Right) in Latin America or Venezuela. Rather, the inclusion of leftist actors in the article is based on their relative importance for the article, and their own identification as “left-wing” as well as the popular perception of the respective political movements or parties. So, in this context, an additional purpose of the study is to assess the extent to which a unified Left exists in Venezuela, and, equally, how solid the political movement of Chávez is from the perspective of leftist political parties. The article goes beyond the leftist parties allied with Chávez to also consider those of the current opposition. The article goes beyond the leftist parties allied with Chávez to also consider those of the current opposition. These include the radical party – Radical Cause (La Causa R)² - and the socialist MAS (Movimiento Al Socialismo). These were both founded following the split of the Communist Party of Venezuela/PCV (Partido Comunista de Venezuela) in 1971.

The Historical Context of the Left in Venezuela

Before going any further in the analysis of Chavismo, a brief résumé of the left in the Venezuelan political party system is necessary in order to achieve a better comprehension of the historical context of recent developments. The first of the modern Venezuelan political parties to formally organize was the PCV, which was founded clandestinely in 1931 during the dictatorship of Juan Vicente Gómez. Like AD and COPEI, the PCV originated out of the student movements of the late 1920s at the Univer-
In the first years after the death of Gómez in 1936, both PCV and PDN (Partido Democrático Nacional), the precursor of AD, operated underground. Until 1945, the PCV dominated Venezuela’s trade union scene, but was out-maneuvered by AD, that successfully incorporated the trade unions, particularly after 1958 following the overthrow of the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez. AD was successful in maintaining and deepening its political organization during dictatorial periods, despite exile and incarceration of its militants. Originally, the party was a lot closer to communism and Marxism. The historic AD leader Rómulo Betancourt openly confessed to being Marxist. The epithet adeco, meaning AD militant, has its roots in the political and ideological categorization of AD during the 1940s. Christian Democratic critics considered the AD to be no more than was only a communist party in disguise, thus the AD-CO label.

Indeed until 1957, the PCV was allied with AD (and COPEI) in the struggle against dictatorship. However, one element of the Punto Fijo Pact of 1958, was precisely the exclusion of the PCV from the political system. During the first two AD governments (1959–68), the communists operated clandestinely as an armed opposition. When COPEI triumphed for the first time in the presidential elections of 1968 with Rafael Caldera, its first actions in government included signing a peace agreement with the leftist guerrillas. The subsequent legalization of the PCV coincided with the beginning of its eventual split. One group, led by Teodoro Petkoff, an ex-guerrilla leader and PCV militant. Maneiro was a co-founder of MAS but left the party soon after its formation. Originally, the Causa R movement grew out of two sectors: the trade unions of the steel industry (SIDOR) in the state of Bolívar, and the huge barrio of Caracas. All top leftist leaders (including MAS) went to Bolívar in 1970–71 to compete for control of the industrial union movement, Venezuela’s biggest trade union. The group around Maneiro would eventually remain insistent in these pursuits. By 1979 Causa R succeeded in reaching the presidency of the steel workers union (SUTISS) with the young electrician Andrés Velásquez. Despite forceful resistance (including the violent persecution of Causa R union activists), the radicals maintained their strength in Bolivar’s unionism and deepened their political project among citizens throughout the 1980s (Lalander, 2004: 123-127).

The Transition Context
The economic crisis of the 1980s evoked social and political repercussions in the Venezuelan society. Corruption among politicians and business leaders
associated with AD and COPEI worsened the situation. Opposition politicians as well as academics and “ordinary citizens” blamed the former for the almost universally deteriorating socio-economic conditions. A credibility crisis in relation to the political leadership deepened. To confront this situation, a commission for political and administrative reform was initiated in 1984 with government decentralization as a key factor. However, the reform was hindered by politicians of the establishment until 1989 when the first direct elections of municipal mayors and regional state governors were held. Similarly it is worth noting that decentralization was accelerated after the violent riots – remembered as the Caracazo - against the neoliberal reform program of February 1989. The social pressure from below, from political movements such as MAS and Causa R, was one crucial factor that obliged President Carlos Andrés Pérez of AD to establish decentralization the same year. In these elections the Venezuelan Left triumphed in several important states. Causa R’s Andrés Velásquez won in Bolivar and Carlos Tablante prevailed in the industrial state of Aragua for MAS. Causa R also triumphed in the Caracas Libertador municipality with Aristóbulo Istúriz, who a decade later would become a key minister in several cabinets of Hugo Chávez. Decentralisation therefore enabled leftist politicians (including radicals) to enter government and State institutions at distinct political-territorial levels from 1989 onwards.

The attempted coups d’état in 1992, the first led by Chávez, Comandante Francisco Arias Cárdenas and other Bolivarian officers, reflected the near universal discontent with the Venezuelan political establishment of AD and COPEI. Chávez himself later admitted that the sentiments reflected in the Caracazo and the way in which the police and military forces were used against the population, triggered the eventual coup attempt. While being arrested after the coup attempt of February 4th, he managed to speak to the nation on Venezuelan television, delivering a message of the “Bolivarian revolution” in which he declared that por abora (for the moment) the coup had failed and in so doing became a recognized political symbol among Venezuelans.

Pérez did not finish his presidential mandate. In 1993 he was impeached for mismanagement of State funds. Leaders of Causa R and José Vicente Rangel, a journalist and leftist politician, played major roles in denouncing Pérez. Causa R presented the act of denouncement that led to the judicial process against Pérez. In this political climate, Causa R was probably the party that enjoyed the most media coverage at that time and Andrés Velásquez emerged as a candidate for the presidential elections. However, after a disputed electoral process, Rafael Caldera — who had left COPEI and formed a new party, Convergencia, — was proclaimed President-elect of Venezuela thanks to an alliance with MAS and a group of smaller, mainly leftist parties. Among the political parties competing in this election, Causa R was the party most associated with Chávez and with a large number of radical militants, unionists and parliamentary deputies who would later join Chavismo.

From MBR-200 to MVR

The Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement-200/MBR-200 (Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario –200) was formed in 1983 and the name alludes to the 200th anniversary of the birth of the Liberator, Simón Bolívar. In fact, there were several Bolivarian civic-military movements around Chávez during his leadership of the MBR-200. The political approach of MBR-200 can be described as nationalist and populist in its anti-establishment strategies. Officially the program of the movement was based on Bolivarianism (the ideas of Bolívar), i.e., a general struggle against corruption and the urgent need to install a moral public power (in addition to the traditional executive, legislative and judicial powers) as well as to engage major popular participation. The MBR movement was strengthened in 1989 as it took advantage of the critical situation related to the Caracazo disturbances. The democratic model promoted by MBR-200 stemmed from the thoughts on democracy of Simón Bolívar, that is (as quoted by Chávez in a prison note): “the most perfect gov-
ernment system is the one that produces the greatest possible sum of happiness, the highest sum of social security and the biggest sum of political stability (Chávez Frías, 1992).” The utilitarian ideas of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill are quite evident in this Bolivarian model of democracy, and Bolívar did indeed read the works of Bentham during the late 18th Century.

It is now important to underline the huge importance of Causa R for the political project of the movement around Chávez. Initially this movement was intimately connected with Causa R, particularly the group around Pablo Medina, many of whom would later assume important posts in the Chávez governments (Buxton, 2001: 5; Lalander, 2004: 198-201). At the time of the coup attempt in February 1992, Chávez has admitted that sectors of the Causa R and MEP parties were committed to the coup (Blanco Muñoz, 1998: 275). Causa R unionist leader, Tello Benítez, has also confirmed that a quantity of militants within the Velásquez-wing of the party reconsidered supporting a more or less violent project of transformation (Benítez, interview, Puerto Ordaz, 29 June, 1997). Chávez recalls his first contacts with the leaders of Causa R. He was introduced to them by his older brother Adán Chávez.13 Chávez described his admiration of Alfredo Maneiro, initial chief ideologist of Causa R:

I spoke with Maneiro in an apartment where I lived there in Maracay [regional capital of Aragua], I was 25 years old, it was in 1978, and it was the only occasion I saw him in my life. I remember Maneiro clearly when he told me: “Chávez, we have now found the fourth table leg.” He spoke about the working class –the leg in Guayana-, the popular sectors, the intellectuals and the middle class, and the armed forces. (...) I went to Catia to see what the Causa R boys were doing, how they spread propaganda. I even went to paste posters in the street with one of their groups. (...) My meeting with Maneiro, why not tell it straight out, I was secure that things would not go via Douglas Bravo [*], therefore I approached Causa R, most of all for their work with the popular movement, which was vital for the civic-military vision of struggle that started to take form in me. Then I had a very clear idea of the work with the masses, and this was missing in Douglas’ group; but in Causa R I felt a smell of the masses (Chávez interviewed in Harnecker, 2002 a: 8).

In a similar manner, Chávez confessed that if Maneiro had not died so suddenly, things would have developed very differently and he does not exclude the possibility that he would have made a political career with Causa R. He also continued for years to meet for discussions with Andrés Velásquez, Pablo Medina and other movement leaders. Although, when Velásquez had triumphed in Bolívar, Chávez failed to establish further contact. Chávez sent messages to Velásquez through Medina and other messengers, but despite even using a wig to approach the regional government building, further direct meetings between the two failed (Harnecker, 2002 a: 10).14 Notwithstanding, Douglas Bravo and his Venezuelan Revolution Party/PRV (Partido de la Revolución Venezolana) would continue to influence Chávez’s movement. With regard to the 1993 elections, a document signed in the Yare prison by Chávez and other MBR-200 leaders (although not Arias Cárdenas) stated that the movement would not participate in any way, thus indicating like others, that the electoral process was set-up from the beginning by the establishment (in Blanco Muñoz, 1998: 178-179). It should be made clear that while imprisoned Chávez received offers from a wide variety of politicians, particularly during the 1993 presidential campaign. However, he refused to participate with any movement associated with the Punto Fijo regime. As he repeatedly stated, a real system change could only be achieved from outside the established party system.

When he was released from prison, Hugo Chávez mobilized the MBR-200 movement in preparation for the regional and municipal elections of 1995 and exhorted active electoral abstention: Por ahora por ninguno (At the moment For Nobody).15 Chávez explained that the objective of the MBR-200 electoral boycott campaign was a strategy to develop the political movement and to increase citizens’ motivation. The boycott served as a protest
against the tradition of partisan politics and indeed the abstention rose to its highest level ever in the democratic history of Venezuela (Blanco Muñoz, 1998: 301-306). At the same time, though, Arias Cárdenas entered the democratic game via the new decentralized rules. Launched on the Causa R slate (but also supported by COPEI) he was elected governor of the important “oil-state” of Zulia, where in February 1992 he had held the then governor Oswaldo Alvarez Paz hostage in his own home. Arias was criticized by the Chávez wing of MBR-200 for participating with a corrupt State. During the same 1995 regional elections, Chávez recognized that propositions on his candidature for a governorship were launched by MBR-200 in states such as Aragua, Lara and Barinas. However, this project was cancelled due to the decision by the constitutional front of the movement to call for an electoral boycott (Díaz Rangel, 2002: 101). However, it is important to emphasise that the political (and ideological) rivalry between Arias and Chávez dates back to their prison term after the 1992 coup attempt (and even earlier to the 1980s with distinct Bolivarian movements). In fact, when Chávez and Arias were in the Yare prison, Causa R leaders Andrés Velásquez and Tello Benítez went to visit them. But it was with Arias Cárdenas that an agreement was closed to join forces in the forthcoming gubernatorial elections (Benítez, interview, Puerto Ordaz, 15 July, 2007).

For Julia Buxton, the question as to whether Bolivarianism takes a leftist doctrine into consideration is not that clear. Particularly during his first years in power, Chávez repudiated Communist ideas (like AD and COPEI had done in the Fourth Republic) and traditional leftist economic policies (such as nationalization, expropriation of private property etc.) were not developed, notwithstanding the role of the State in the economy specified in the new 1999 Constitution (Buxton, 2005: 339). In fact, during the first years of Chávez’s rule, ultra-leftist political parties, such as the ex-guerrilla Bandera Roja (Red Flag) and Tercer Camino (led by Douglas Bravo) denounced the Chávez government for favoring neo-liberalism (Ellner, 2001: 7). Already in July 2000, new elections were carried through. The strongest rival to Chávez was his former soul-arms- and jail-brother Arias Cárdenas, representing 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 as president Arias would support continued decentralization and dialogue. Neverthe-
less, after a dirty campaign Chávez managed to triumph by a large margin, 56 percent of the votes compared with 37 percent obtained by Arias. However, perhaps the PPT suffered the most from the dramatic turmoil of the electoral campaign, eventually withdrawing under noisy circumstances from the Patriotic Pole. President Chávez self-confidently responded that he did not need the support of the PPT, and furthermore he felt sure that many PPT grassroots militants would still vote for him in the presidential elections (Medina, 2001: 176-178). This last statement by Chávez can be interpreted as a kind of recognition of decentralization on behalf of the president (and at the time presidential candidate), i.e. from the perspective of vote-splitting between the political-territorial entities.

Crisis, Divisions and Restrengthening of Chavismo

In 2001 the popularity of Chávez weakened. The first concrete evidence of this was the victory by AD-associated leader Carlos Ortega in the CTV workers confederation elections. A new kind of political opposition emerged at the same time, as manifested in the Democratic Coordinator/CD (Coordinadora Democrática), which brought together Causa R, radical-leftist Bandera Roja, MAS, Primero Justicia, COPEI and AD in the single alliance with a broad spectrum of new political movements and ex-Chavismo leaders. Historically, the CD goes back to the Regional leadership bloc of the mid- and late 1990s. The discontent with Chávez was illustrated through an almost general strike, spearheaded by the CD, which culminated in street shootings resulting in several fatalities, and the brief military detention of Chávez in April 2002. Mobilizations of Chávez supporters however helped the President to return to power. The fatal shootings (still under investigation) of April 11, threw the MVR into crisis and the party’s key organizer, Luis Miquilena, withdrew from both the government and Chavismo. The hasta maximum PPT national leader Pablo Medina also withdrew from Chavismo at the same time, leaving the party to join the opposition. Chávez concluded afterwards that Medina never had accepted his leadership (Harnecker, 2002 b: 8). Arias Cárdenas was among those who most grimly attacked Chávez, blaming him personally for the shootings. In retrospect, however, it appears that the coup attempt actually strengthened Chávez and Chavismo.

The general political atmosphere was consequently rather confusing and uncertain at that time, perhaps especially so among the leftists who had been previously allied with Chavismo. MAS had experienced several internal divisions since 1998. One group of dissidents formed the Democratic Left /ID (Izquierda Democrática) in 1999. Another MAS split occurred in 2002, resulting in two parties with the same name: the “MAS—menos” or “MAS-oficialista” which was more closely tied to the Chávez government; and, the “MAS-MAS”, as it was popularly known, led by Leopoldo Puchi. In 1998–99 Puchi had been the MAS leader closest to Chávez. As leader of MAS-MAS he joined the fragmented opposition in the National Assembly. The relationship between MAS and the government had already deteriorated before this split. In a public speech in October 2001 Chávez stated that “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” (Lalander, 2004: 269). The oficialista faction of MAS then registered as a new party – We Can (Podemos) - which included as members forty elected mayors and prominent governors, such as Didalco Bolívar in Aragua and Ramón Martínez in Sucre. Other influential MAS leaders left the party, like its former parliamentary chief Luis Manuel Esculpi, and MAS co-founder Pompeyo Márquez, who joined forces with Arias Cárdenas in the new Unión party. The roots of Unión can be traced to decentralization and the successful experiences of Arias as governor of Zulia.

In the regional elections of October 2004, the Chavismo alliance triumphed in 21 of the 23 regional states, and MVR won in 193 of the 332 municipalities, although it is worth noting that the alliance is constituted by at least three strong parties. However, in the regional strongholds of the opposition, like the states of Carabobo, Yaracuy and...
Miranda, the differences in the votes polled by the candidates were indeed minimal, but the National Electoral Council finally proclaimed the triumph of the chavista candidates in all three states.

The Coordinadora Democrática was dissolved after these elections, and the Chavismo alliance—the Patriotic Pole—became the “Bloc of Change” (Bloque del Cambio). Several chavistas considered that with their landslide victory in the 2004 regional elections, the cycle which began in 1989 with the Caracazo riots was now ended. In the municipal elections of 2005, MVR obtained 58% of the posts. Thanks in part to an election boycott by most opposition parties in the parliamentary elections of 2005 the Chavismo alliance won 100% of the National Assembly seats, thus leading some commentators to classify Venezuela as a mono-party-system at the parliamentary level. At the same time there are analysts (like the author of this article) who believe that the political opposition does indeed exist (and has always existed in post-1958 Venezuela). However, the current opposition is disillusioned, passive and guilty of severe strategic errors as it focuses too much energy on criticizing Chávez and internal fighting. The discourses of the majority of the opposition parties have been concentrated on the actions and expressions of President Chávez to such an extent that from this perspective Chávez could be classified as the actual leader—or anti-leader—of the present Venezuelan opposition.

Presidential elections of 2006

In the presidential elections of December 3rd, 2006, Chávez obtained 62.84% of the vote, compared with 36.9% obtained by Manuel Rosales, as illustrated in this table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Chávez</th>
<th>Rosales</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MVR</td>
<td>41.66%</td>
<td>13.37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Podemos</td>
<td>6.53%</td>
<td>11.17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PPT</td>
<td>5.13%</td>
<td>2.24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCV</td>
<td>2.94%</td>
<td>0.61%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Consejo Nacional Electoral, 2007)

It is significant that a majority of AD militants, including labor and grassroots activists, chose to support the Nuevo Tiempo slate of (ex-adeco) Rosales. The percentage of electoral support for Chávez through the slates of other parties than MVR could, from one perspective, indicate the existence of a democratic pluralism within the chavista alliance. However, President Chávez himself does not does not agree with that view, as reflected in his post-election comments:

> Look here and listen carefully to what I will tell you. With all frankness, you know it is true. I saw some people there on the television saying: «...That our party gathered I do not know how many votes and the other obtained etc ...». Those votes belong to Chávez! Those votes do not belong to any party (Chávez Frías, 2006).

The popularity of Chávez and his anti-party and anti-establishment strategies can be considered a kind of re-centralization of the political system on the individual leader and a shrinkage of the democratic space through the partial subordination of political parties. This new situation can also be interpreted as a return to the Latin American populist tradition with respect to the leader-masses relationship. The personalization and concentration of political power in one person avoids the traditional institutionalized ways of doing politics, often with the support of the masses. However, according to Chavismo the democratic space has increased and deepened beyond political elites through the development of Bolivarian Circles (Círculos Bolivianos), a number of State social mission programs (misiones) and, since 2005, with the creation of community councils (consejos comunales). These are all referred to as the foundations of a new kind of participatory democracy. However, several chavista informants of the author have severely criticized the representative structure of Chavismo at distinct levels. Or, as one grass-roots leader interviewed by journalist Alonso Moleiro puts it:
AD and COPEI are no any longer the enemies of the government... The enemies are to be found within; there are lots of people inside this government that are prepared to make personal gains on the shoulders of the President. The enemies of the President are inside the MVR (Moleiro, 2006).

A New Socialist Party: Unification or Division?

While writing the present article, the creation of the Unified Socialist Party of Venezuela –PSUV- has been advancing under rather turbulent circumstances. The project involved the dissolution of all parties involved in the Chávez government, which met with immediate resistance from several of the alliance parties. The PCV, PPT and Podemos parties were directly asked by Chávez to leave when they preferred to “wait and see” before dissolving their parties to join the PSUV. Indeed important sectors of these parties broke away to join the PSUV. The dissolution of the MVR went more smoothly, as well as (maybe more surprisingly) that of the Unión party of Francisco Arias Cárdenas, who had returned to Chavismo a few years earlier.25

Returning now to the historical context of the previous party of Chávez, debates on the need for internal party decentralization had been going on in MVR since 1999. The issue constitutes a delicate dilemma on how to balance centralization with political-territorial autonomy as well as popular participation. It has very likely been a source of internal conflict within MVR and its allied parties, as manifested in the present formation of the PSUV. Former parliamentary head of the socialist bloc, Francisco Ameliach, recalled in August 2007 the evolution of the MVR: “The MVR was a successful electoral apparatus, but it was incapable of converting itself into a programmatic and organic force and impeded ideological formation (Venezuelanalysis.com, September 8th, 2007)”.26

The arguments of the chavista parties who have chosen not to join the PSUV have concerned inter alia the prospect of a possible ideologization without pluralism. On the other hand, Chávez has repeatedly stated that the PSUV will be the most democratic party in Venezuela’s history. At the same time, it has also been suggested that the formation of the PSUV could be a means of getting rid of “inconvenient” leaders of both MVR and the alliance parties. It is equally important to mention that Venezuela was at the same time redrafting a proposed Constitution. This also affected the debate in and around the PSUV. The contents of the proposed constitution has stirred up the Chavismo parties, especially the mooted amendments regarding decentralization and the creation of federal districts as well as the authorization of the State social missions to replace political-territorial governments, particularly at the regional level. Ever since coming to power, Chávez has warned about the risk of a regionalist system based on caudillismo (regional strongmen). Podemos once again drew Chávez’s anger by questioning the changes related to decentralization in the constitutional draft. The president accused Podemos of acting against the Bolivarian socialist project and told them to pack their suitcases and join the opposition. In response, the Podemos governor of the Sucre state, Ramón Martínez called in August 2007 for an alliance of mayors and governors to defend regional and municipal autonomy. He claimed that Ramoncismo27 was stronger than Chavismo in his regional state.

Not only are we in defense of regional autonomy, but of the constitution [of 1999]… In this struggle, I am accompanied by more than 46 mayors throughout the country. I’m not going to give you more details of the plan. I am the only one sticking out my nose (Martinez, in (Venezuelanalysis.com, August 22nd, 2007).28

In the same manner, chavista mayor Samuel Dario Maldonado in the Táchira state pronounced himself against the contents of the reform just days before the popular referendum on the proposed new Constitution, and simultaneously withdrew from the PSUV (although he remained chavista). He argued that the reformed violated constitutional rights and that “[the PSUV] is a party in which there is exclusion and only one line of thinking” (El Universal, 2007b).29 It is also relevant to emphasize that Chavismo lost the referendum with a minimal mar-
gin of less than 1%. Chávez declared afterwards that: “For the moment we couldn’t (Por ahora no pudimos)...For me this is not a defeat. It was best like this” (El Universal, 2007c). The result could be interpreted as having stabilised democracy as well as the regime, from the perspective of Chavismo, since the President recognized an unfavourable result. The mobilization of chavista sectors against the reform most probably determined the final outcome and likewise confirmed the value of decentralization and democratic pluralism within Chavismo. The centralization/decentralization tension has continued, influencing the on-going campaigns for the elections of municipal and regional state authorities scheduled to take place on November 23rd 2008. Discrepancies regarding who should represent the movement at local and/or regional levels have caused further divisions within the chavista alliance. As for the possible personalistic character of the PSUV project, critics from both within and outside Chavismo have emphasized the risk of the PSUV losing the democratic pluralism that the several constituent political actors have brought to the government alliance. President Chávez, for his part, has threatened the alliance parties and militants who choose not to enter the PSUV with exclusion from government.

The parties who wish to maintain [outside the PSUV], well stay there, they can stay alone there. But of course, they would have to leave the government. They will leave the government, leave my government. Leave the national government. I want one party to govern with me, one party. Because everyday there are more and more parties, more each day, around fourteen parties (Chávez Frías, 2006).

Concluding Remarks
Hugo Chávez has managed to unite Venezuela’s leftist movements like never before. However, his success has not included several of the historically most important left-wing parties who are mobilizing within the current political opposition, albeit with relatively weak electoral support since the late 1990s. The emergence and development of the political movement around Chávez could, at a first glance, seem like a return to single party control of the political system, considering the MVR’s strength and dominance since 1999. However, in this case the evolving political party has rather been characterized as a popular movement with charismatic and personalistic leadership.

This article has emphasized the increasing institutional inclusiveness of the political system through the institutionalization of the leftist guerrillas in the late 1960s and post-1989 developments. The party system has experienced dramatic transformations as well as an undermining of the hitherto dominant actors – AD and COPEI - as a result of the decentralization process initiated in December 1989. The process of decentralization increased the access of the Left [and other alternative opposition actors] to the State machinery and proliferated the arenas for political activity. The development of Causa R during the 1980s and early 1990s, culminating in a near successful national presidency bid, very importantly changed popular opinion towards the idea that a (radical) left could govern Venezuela. The value and function of decentralization within Chavismo have been examined with the aim of better comprehending the inter- and intra-partisan tensions within the movement. However, regarding the position of leftists in political power institutions in the context of Chavismo, not all of these were eventually devoted to Chávez. Although the chavista movement has, to a large extent, continued a wave of anti-politics, anti-traditionalism and championing of the needs of marginalized sectors that were initiated earlier mainly by the class-conscious Causa R, Chávez has not secured the devotion of all left-wing politicians who have entered various levels of government. The incorporation of more institutionalized leftist leaders in Chavismo at the same time facilitated the transformation.

The article has shown that the organizational origins of Chavismo, which have been too often ignored by scholars writing on the Chávez phenomenon, are indeed worthy of analytical consideration. The vast majority of chavista activists came into the movement from previous leftist experiences, from the 1960s guerrilla movement to...
more recent organizations. Similarly, several splits of the leftist parties since the late 1990s can be traced to the Chávez’s rise to power of and his actions in government. Some actors, like Arias Cárdenas, and to a certain extent, the PPT and MAS (from 2002 onwards, Podemos) parties have moved back and forth, i.e. with or against Chavismo. Chávez still enjoys solid grassroots support, often manifested in a (populist) leader-masses relationship. His hitherto anti-party has undermined the prominence of political parties in the Chávez era. Venezuelan politics have definitively moved leftwards since the rise to power of Chávez, even if the leftist nature of Chavismo remained unclear during the first years in government. It is still early to take into account the possibly more far-reaching implications of the creation of the new socialist party/PSUV within the Venezuelan political party system and concerned political parties, as the cases of Podemos, PPT and PCV which already have divided in the process.

1 Other versions of the article have been published in Problèmes d’Amérique Latine, No. 66/67, 2007, and in Reflexión Política, No. 19, 2008.
2 R for Radical is always reversed in the party logo
3 Pérez Jiménez was a former ally of AD within the Armed Forces, who interrupted the democratization process led by AD in 1948 and installed a dictatorial regime that lasted a decade.
4 The Punto Fijo Pact was a fundamental agreement between AD, COPEI and Venezuelan representative institutions and social sectors at the moment of democratization in 1938 (Lalander, 2004: 101-103).
5 Other factors contributed as well, as international pressure, e.g. from the multi-lateral banks, and Pérez likewise used decentralization as a way of resolving an internal conflict within AD, in this context backed-up by adeco leaders at the regional and local levels, who saw possibilities with the reform. The national economic crisis and credibility crisis of the traditional parties were other factors that contributed to the reform (Lalander, 2004).
6 The second coup attempt of November 27th was led by a group of rebel officers in a Senate meeting (in an atmosphere of lynching feelings among many of the AD and COPEI leaders); something that together with his anti-traditionalism approach would play in his favor in the presidential elections. Caldera granted amnesty to Chávez, Arias Cárdenas and other rebels/coup leaders in 1994. Arias was not only pardoned by Caldera but also appointed president of the Program for Mother and Infant Nutrition (PAMI).
7 For a deeper analysis of the civic-military movements around Chávez, see Garrido, 2007.
8 The usage of Bolivar in the discourses of the modern Venezuelan parties is far from new. The Venezuelan ex-president and AD founder Rómulo Betancourt agreed with Bolivar on the necessity to maintain political and administrative centralization, and Causa R has also repeatedly included the Liberator in several party documents and discourses. (See for example, Lalander, 2004: 198). Also in other Latin American countries, the Bolivarian spirit is manifest, particularly those related to continental integration.
9 Many analysts, politicians and Venezuelan citizens argue that Chávez’s rise to power of and his actions in government. Some actors, like Arias Cárdenas, and to a certain extent, the PPT and MAS (from 2002 onwards, Podemos) parties have moved back and forth, i.e. with or against Chavismo. Chávez still enjoys solid grassroots support, often manifested in a (populist) leader-masses relationship. His hitherto anti-party has undermined the prominence of political parties in the Chávez era. Venezuelan politics have definitively moved leftwards since the rise to power of Chávez, even if the leftist nature of Chavismo remained unclear during the first years in government. It is still early to take into account the possibly more far-reaching implications of the creation of the new socialist party/PSUV within the Venezuelan political party system and concerned political parties, as the cases of Podemos, PPT and PCV which already have divided in the process.
10 Worth remarking is likewise a Chávez-aspect in the discourse of Caldera. At the time of the coup attempt, Caldera defended the rebel officers in a Senate meeting (in an atmosphere of lynching feelings among many of the AD and COPEI leaders); something that together with his anti-traditionalism approach would play in his favor in the presidential elections. Caldera granted amnesty to Chávez, Arias Cárdenas and other rebels/coup leaders in 1994. Arias was not only pardoned by Caldera but also appointed president of the Program for Mother and Infant Nutrition (PAMI).
11 For a deeper analysis of the civic-military movements around Chávez, see Garrido, 2007.
12 The usage of Bolivar in the discourses of the modern Venezuelan parties is far from new. The Venezuelan ex-president and AD founder Rómulo Betancourt agreed with Bolivar on the necessity to maintain political and administrative centralization, and Causa R has also repeatedly included the Liberator in several party documents and discourses. (See for example, Lalander, 2004: 198). Also in other Latin American countries, the Bolivarian spirit is manifest, particularly those related to continental integration.
13 Adán Chávez made academic career at the Universidad de los Andes in Mérida, and later he would hold important government positions from 1999 onwards.
14 The “Por ahora”-expression became a symbolic trademark for Hugo Chávez and the political movements around him, since the coup attempt on the 4th of February 1992.
15 MVR and Chávez combine certain symbolic trademarks with the political movement. The Fifth Republic in the party’s name alludes to Venezuela as a State. The first Republic was established with Simón Bolivar, the fourth began with the Punto Fijo Pact in 1938 (Lalander, 2004: 255).
16 It is worth recalling that Chávez kept Maritza Izaguirre, Minister of Economy of the Caldera government, at the same post in his first cabinet.
17 As a direct result of the popular referenda on the new constitution in 1999, elections of executive and legislative authorities were carried through in July 2000, including re-elections of those authorities that were elected in 1998. Due to the separation of the regional and parliamentary elections from the presidential ones in 1998, Hugo Chávez with allies considered these elections to be non-representative.
18 Neither AD nor COPEI participated with a proper presidential candidate before this presidential election. After the humiliation of the 1998 presidential election, AD and COPEI had been almost politically extinguished.
19 Even though the polarization level of the Venezuelan society might have been at its peak around 2002, the polarization aspect of the Venezuelan political and civil societies has however frequently tended to be exaggerated in media and the academic debate. All Venezuelans are not that engaged in politics. The relatively more “neutral” citizens are often referred to as the Ni-ni’s (Neither-nor), i.e., neither Chavismo nor opposition.
20 The strongest Chavismo allies were: PPT (17 mayoralities) and Podemos (10). AD only obtained 38 mayoralities, COPEI 8, and Convergencia 3. Likewise, Chavismo triumphed in the Super-Mayoralty of Caracas, with Juan Barreto of MVR.
21 The Chavismo alliance controls the Assembly, and the MVR party...
is represented by 114 deputies of the totally 167 seats.

2.3 Manuel Rosales was most of all recognized for his merits as mayor of Maracaibo and thereafter governor of Zulia. 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.

2.4 For a more detailed presentation of the results, see: http://www.cne.gob.ve/divulgacionPresidencial/resultado_nacional.php

2.5 Arias Cárdenas was nominated Ambassador of Venezuela to the United Nations in 2006, after a period of having re-approached Chavismo.

2.6 http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/print/2592

2.7 Refers to the movement and/or supporters of Martínez, who has been elected four times Governor of Sucre, the first three representing MAS and in 2004 Podemos. An important symbolic triumph of Chavismo occurred in early 2007, when Podemos substituted Acción Democrática as the Venezuelan representative in the Socialist International, albeit amidst severe tensions related to the creation process of the PSUV and the destiny of Podemos as a party. Podemos auto-classifies the party doctrine as social democratic.

2.8 http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/print/2361

2.9 Similarly, the Association of Venezuelan Mayors (Asociación de Alcaldes de Venezuela/ADAVE), mobilized against the proposal which they classified as “illegal and eliminating the decentralization process” (El Universal, 2007a).

Bibliography
(all internet-references revised on August 29, 2008)


Interviews (selection)