The rise of Chavismo and the erosion of the traditional party system in Venezuela

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By Patricia Graf

Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between the rise of non-party-actors and the decline of traditional parties in Venezuela. It argues that beside the fact that many traditional parties have discredited themselves through their participation in corruption scandals and bad political performance, it is also the populist discourse of the political leadership that works as a catalysing force towards the deinstitutionalisation of the party system.

First, a short overview of the main reasons for the erosion of the traditional party system, the diminishment of parties that one can count on, and the change of attitude in society towards political parties will be given. With the aid of the theory of populism, it will be described how political parties are driven completely to the margin of the political system by Hugo Chávez. One main characteristic of populist leaders is the search to unite the mass and its leader. Therefore, they use manichaeistic discourse and delegitimize everyone who is not in favour of them. If we take a look at the definition of parties as representation of a part of the society, it quickly becomes obvious that parties have a difficult position in society. The manichaeistic discourse has further implications: having only the choice to be Chavista or Antichavista, the society has become very polarized. Nevertheless, it has to be noticed that Chavez addresses the social cleavage that the traditional parties were no longer able to respond to during the regime that preceded Chávez. Furthermore, by using the mechanism of the referendum to generate legitimacy, the Chavismo has awaked a new political conscience in society.

It can be noted that the once so stable party system of Venezuela has undergone a process of deinstitutionalisation. The task of reinstitutionlizing it will be a very difficult one.

Introduction

“Parties are not what they once were” is the title of Philippe Schmitter famous article about the loss of influence of political parties (ibid. 2001). This aphorism clearly sums up the situation of Venezuelan parties. Having once been the main protagonists of representative democracy, they are now a shadow of their former selves and an object of disillusion and hatred of many Venezuelans. New parties have entered the scene, but most of them have no stable organizational structures and are highly dependent on Hugo Chávez. Considering the fact that presidential elections will be held this coming December, the political situation is becoming increasingly difficult: As a reaction to the abstention of opposition parties from parliamentary elections in December 2005, Chávez is now threatening to extend his presidency by constitutional change if the opposition does not take part in the elections with a rival candidate. How did it happen that the, once so strong, political parties not only show no
resistance to the political project Hugo Chávez proposes, but also present no alternative? And how is possible it that instead of a once stable party system one can today only visit its ruins? The reasons for the decline of the Venezuelan party system have already been considered by several experts of the Venezuelan political system. Most of the articles view the economic crisis combined with the suicide of the traditional political parties AD and COPEI as the main reason for decay. The latter had become corrupt, closed systems to such an extend, that they lost all legitimacy (Hellinger 2003; Roberts 2003; Buxton 2005). The phenomenon of Chávismo can therefore be considered as a consequence, not as a cause of the decay of the old political system. Although I share this opinion, I argue that several catalyzing forces exist that have sped up this development. Among those is the political discourse of both Venezuelan government and opposition that has become more and more aggressive. Indeed studies on political communication in the Fifth Republic paint an alarming picture (Bolívar 2005; Petkoff 2005). Especially traditional parties are often object to public hate discourse. Therefore, the effect of the populist discourse of Hugo Chavez on political parties will be examined in this work. It will be argued that, beside the fact that the traditional parties have discredited themselves by involving themselves in corruption scandals and political incredibility, the anti-party discourse of Hugo Chávez works as catalyst and makes the situation of political parties more difficult. Furthermore, it is found that besides the delegitimization of traditional parties, the populist discourse has a destabilizing effect on the concept of political parties itself. To undertake this analysis, a review of the main features of the political crisis at the time that Chavez seized power will be given. Then a short sketch will be drawn of the momentarily relevant parties as well as attitudes of society towards parties. For the analysis of the discourse we will base on general characteristics of populist discourse and the definition of political parties as representatives of a part of society. Out of this we will compile a catalogue of features of the chavista discourse that may have a destabilizing and delegitimizing effect on political parties.
The Crisis of the Party System

Populism is often a phenomenon of a political or an economic crisis. By discrediting the political establishment and voicing the hopes of the underprivileged populists can draw support. In the following there will be given a short summary of the political and economic crises that gave rise to the presidency of Hugo Chávez.

Economic Crisis

For decades the political landscape of Venezuela has been dominated by the pact of Puntofijo. This political pact had been fixed in 1958 between the two major parties, AD (Acción Democrática) and COPEI (Comisión de Organización Política Electoral) plus the URD (Unión Radical Democrática). It included the most important forces of the country: the major parties. The military, the church, the major business association and the moderate unions. The pact was based on the distribution of the petrol rent and was able to integrate all relevant political forces into the political system. Even the former marxist guerilla were included into the system after it had given up the armed struggle.

Several incidents contributed to the erosion of this political pact. On the one hand, the country entered a deep economic crisis in the 80s and suffered from the drop of petrol prices after the golden years of the petrol bonanza. The political elite was unable to manage the crisis. It also became obvious that it had lost control over the bureaucracy: As they could not fall back upon the petrol rent, ministries began to finance autonomously extensive social programs and government salaries by foreign credits and intensified the economic crisis. Furthermore, political parties had proved unable to use the rent with effectively and had used development policies that didn’t work (Boeckh 2003; Mommer 2003: 166, 167). Another point of the economic crisis was the high decree of capital outflow that had already started in the 70s, in such a way that at times the amount of Venezuelan private capital abroad was higher than the amount of foreign debt. In sum, the economy eroded the basis of the pact of Punto Fijo, namely the oil rent and exposed the political inability of the parties of the Punto Fijo.

Political crisis

Parallel to the economic crisis, the parties of Punto Fijo suffered from a political crisis. AD was shaken by a generation conflict. The new generation no longer agreed with the kind of patronage that the older generations practiced. Furthermore, it was internally fragmented (Hellinger 2003: 31). As the internal structures had never been institutionalised, a struggle to
fill the vacancies began. The COPEI struggled under a similar development. Its own founder, Rafael Caldera dealt the party an intense blow. In the struggle for a candidature for presidential elections he fell out with COPEI and founded his own movement, Convergencia.

**Anti Party Mood**

The action taken by Rafael Caldera leads one to another important reason for the erosion of Punto Fijo, the rise of an anti-party lobby (Levine 2002). This phenomenon became very obvious in the election campaign of 1998, as the election was dominated by independent candidates that relied only on movements – pure election clubs such as the movement IRENE, founded by the former beauty queen, Irene Sáez.

**Cleavages**

The erosion of cleavages is another important component for the decay of the party system. (Roberts 2003) In its foundation times, the system of Punto Fijo was based on different cleavages. The AD represented more of the working class and the lower classes, and COPEI tended to represent the Business and middle classes. As time went on the cleavages moved, and at some point AD became attractive for the intellectuals. Fewer and fewer political parties were able to accurately represent the existing societal cleavages. Roberts therefore argues for a sleeping cleavage that was woken up and repolitizised by Hugo Chávez (Roberts 2003).

**Ideological vacuum**

Another important point that marked the political crisis was the ideological vacuum that had spread throughout the political parties. The political parties still put forward political programs, but these were not of any importance. President Carlos Andrés Pérez, for example, started with a traditional political program during his 1989 campaign, but once in office, implemented neoliberal measures that were in complete contradiction to his election promises. Furthermore, the political parties no longer care for society and their needs, which led to furious protests by the latter: In February 1989 the poor came from the surrounding hills to Caracas to protest the neoliberal measures of Pérez, particularly the price increase of public transport.

**Decentralization**

Decentralization also weakened political parties. In 1989 there had been introduced local elections under Pérez to calm political unrest. That meant that communities could nominate
their own candidates. Therefore, A strong alternative political power that also weakened the parties arose from the local and regional levels. AD and COPEI tried to maintain their power by fraud and thereby discredited themselves even more (Hellinger 2003: 33).

**Rise of the informal sector**

Another reason for the increasing separation of society from political parties are the changing patterns of life and production caused by the neoliberal measures under Pérez. As a consequence of modernisation of agriculture many workers of this sector lost their employment and moved into the cities in search for jobs, which they mostly found in the informal sector. Working conditions in the informal sector are highly heterogen and insecure, with most workers suffering a very difficult economic situation. It is therefore very difficult for political parties and unions to reach and organize the members of the informal sector. For Chávez, on the contrary, it was much easier to reach these sectors of society: Like all populists, he preferred a direct and unmediated communication with the masses circumventing parties. He did not need parties or party affiliated unions to mobilize the marginalized masses of the population.

All these developments led to the erosion of the once renowned system of Punto Fijo, the discreditation of political parties and the frustration of society. It therefore was easy for Chávez to launch his candidature; he had only to bring out the hopes and the existing anger of society with the elites of Punto Fijo. The System of Punto Fijo had lost one pillar, its economic force; the political parties had discredited themselves through corruption and internal fragmentation; and the social pacts had eroded due to the economic crisis and neoliberal measures without social programs. Today, therefore, the name of Punto Fijo stands for a cartel of elites that had run down the country and had proved incapable of productively using petrol rent (Boeckh 2000/2001: 93).

**Political parties in Venezuela**

With the decay of the Punto Fijo System, the traditional parties lost their dominant role and the party system became more diverse. The defining qualities of the party system of the fifth republic, as characterized by Molina are “multipartidism, ideological polarization and deinstitutionalization” (Molina 2004: 177). The party system in Venezuela is now structured as follows:
Democratic Action (AD, Acción Democrática)

Founded in 1941 by the famous Romulo Betancourt, the social democratic AD is one of the main oppositional forces after being one of the key actors of the Punto Fijo System for 40 years. It was founded as a mass party and presented itself as the party of the people (Ellner 1999: 128) AD is one of the political parties that in 2005 refused to take part in parliamentary elections. Together with COPEI, AD is the main target of the Anti-Establishment discourse of Hugo Chávez.

Committee of independent political electoral organization (COPEI, Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente)

Founded in 1946 by former president Rafael Caldeira, COPEI was together with AD the dominant political party in Venezuela from 1958 to 1993. In the beginning it relied on a narrow catholic base and formed the opposition to AD-regime between 1945 and 1948 (Trienio). Since then, COPEI had transformed into a multi-class party with a durable structure and permanent professional leadership (Kornblith 1995: 47). COPEI has suffered from the breakdown of Punto Fijo to a greater extent than AD. Due to the fact that it drew its support also from the business class, it is considered as the representative for the oligarchy that is accused for having enriched itself during the Punto Fijo System. “Three new parties have fed from its onetime clientele: Covergencia, Proyecto Venezuela and Primero Justicia” (Molina 2004: 169).

Fifth Republic Movement (MVR, Movimiento Quinta República)

The MVR was founded by Hugo Chávez in 1994 after his release from prison and is the successor of the former Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement 200 (MBR-200, Movimiento Revolucionario Bolivariano). The MVR was built as platform for the articulation of movements and personalities that supported Chávez. The ideologies, interests and hopes of these actors were partially of divergent nature (López Maya 2002: 115). The leftist MVR dominated the Patriotic Pole, a coalition of several, smaller left-wing parties and the supportive base of Chávez. McCoy compares the MVR with the AD during the Trienio, representing the part of society that had not been included into the system of Punto Fijo (McCoy 2004: 285). Molina characterizes the MVR as “personalistic and highly unstable”
with “strong antisystem orientations” (Molina 2004: 166,167). He further prophesizes an unhappy future for the MVR, as it is tied to Hugo Chávez “and its fortune rises and falls with his personal success or failure” (Molina 2004: 168).

**Movement to Socialism (MAS, Movimiento al Socialismo)**

The left-wing MAS was founded by former Planning Minister Teodoro Petkoff and Pompeyo Márquez in 1971 as a socialist alternative to the Venezuelan Communist Party (PCV). Since then, MAS had competed successfully with the dominating parties, AD and COPEI, within the Punto Fijo System. In the 90s, MAS departed strongly from its ideological beginnings as it backed the reforms of structural adjustment of Rafael Caldera (López Maya 2002: 120). In 1998 MAS split over the question of whether to support Hugo Chávez, and several historical and emblematic leaders, such as Teodoro Petkoff and Pompeyo Márquez, left the party. In 2001 internal conflict arose once again regarding the question of whether to remain part of the Chávez government (Molina 2004: 169). MAS also has an anti-party-touch, having assumed for itself the name of „Movimiento de los Movimientos“ (López Maya 2002: 120).

**Fatherland for All (PPT, Patria para Todos)**

The leftist party PPT was born in 1997 as a division of the party La Causa R. It was originally a member of the Chávez alliance, Polo Patriótico, which it quit in 2000. This separation has caused a significant loss of influence from which the PPT has tried to recuperate by intensifying its regional and municipal bases (López Maya 2002: 119). Similar to the MAS and La Causa R, the PPT criticised the vertical structure of the former Venezuelan Communist Party and therefore also refers to itself as the „Movement of the movements”. It therefore takes part in the anti-party discourse that earns it the votes of the disillusioned.

**Justice First (PJ, Primero Justicia)**

The party PJ was founded as a regional party in the state of Miranda in 2000. This centre-right political organization also belongs to the opposition forces to president Chávez and finds its supports over all amongst former Copei partisans.
With the new constitution things have become much more difficult for the political parties. The constitution does not assign them any important task, it does not even mention it\(^1\). Public party financing is prohibited. This reduces especially the chances for survival for small parties with followers who are without material resources. The big opposition parties have helped themselves by acquiring financial aid from the USA. This practice has had two side effects. On the one hand, the parties were enabled to survive without a supportive societal base. On the other hand, the parties have discredited themselves even more by presenting themselves as the instruments of the imperialist power (Buxton 2005).

The attitude of society towards political parties has changed significantly since the decay of the Punto Fijo System. It seems that the rejection of the traditional parties, as caused by their moral decay, has already led to a different view of political parties. “In voting for change in the political system, Venezuelans also expressed their desire for a state that was less autonomous and more accountable to citizens”, as McCoy explains this phenomenon (ibid. 2004: 278). She argues that the bad performance of the traditional parties led Venezuelans to look for political alternatives to representative democracy. “Rather than transferring their loyalties to new parties, they turned to charismatic leaders, social movements, and civic associations” (McCoy 2004: 290). Gil Yepes expresses this even more succinctly: “The Bolivarians see political parties as necessary evils, facades that they use in order to please democrats abroad and win elections at home. The political party system, however, is not to be the primary locus of public policy decision making” (Gil Yepes 2004: 250). In his study on political elites in Venezuela, Hillman notices that even some parts of the elite thought that “representative political institutions shielded political leaders from the popular will. They favored mechanisms that allowed the people to focus their demands directly on politicians.”(Hillmann 2004: 127).

All these remarks allow one to presume that the attitude towards political parties has changed fundamentally, in that there has been a change from a pure partidocracia to a democracy with many kinds of participation beyond political parties. They even let us assume that Venezuelans share a certain distrust in political parties as a mechanism of participation. How was such a fundamental change possible? Dalton and Molina, based on Weisberg, argue that “Party dealignment and decayed legitimacy signal negative attitudes toward the political parties that have long dominated the party system and toward parties as institutions” (Dalton

\(^1\) Nevertheless the Venezuelan constitution is no exception. The constitution of the USA does not mention political parties either.
Molina further notes that, therefore, once a party system has been deinstitutionalized it is much more difficult to reinstitutionalize it than to institutionalise a new party system (Molina 2004: 174). For Venezuela that means that the bad performance and the moral decay of traditional parties has had fundamental effects on the legitimacy of political parties per se. Nevertheless, I think that the anti-party discourse of Hugo Chávez has had a catalysing effect and has deepened this party crisis, although I share the notion of many scholars that Chávez is a consequence, not the cause, of the party system’s “unravelling” (Molina 2004: 169). In the following, we will analyse the political discourse of Hugo Chávez and try to reveal its delegitimizing and destructive force on political parties.

**Populism and political parties**

There exists an extensive amount on studies that deal with the populist features of the leadership of Hugo Chávez, as well as with the concepts of populism itself\(^2\). Roberts has solved the problem of terminological multidimensionality in a pragmatic way. He has compiled out of different concepts a catalogue of defining characteristics that shall be used in the following. If one of the following characteristics is lacking, Roberts calls this a subtype. The five core properties of populism are (Roberts 1996: 88):

1. “a personalistic and paternalistic, though not necessarily charismatic, pattern of political leadership”
2. “a heterogeneous, multiclass political coalition concentrated in subaltern sectors of society”
3. “a top-down process of political mobilization that either bypasses institutionalized forms of mediation or subordinates them to more direct linkages between he leader and the masses”
4. “an amorphous or eclectic ideology, characterized by a discourse that exalts subaltern sectors or is antielitist and/ or antiestablishment”
5. “an economic project that utilizes widespread redistributive or clientelistic methods to create a material foundation for popular sector support”

The advantage of the concept of Roberts is, that it is not focussed on just one perspective of populism as the classical dimension of di Tella (historic/ sociological), Laclau (ideologic

\(^2\) Compare Roberts (1996) for a overview over different concepts on populism and Ellner (2005) for a classification of Chávez as populist.
Perspective) or Sachs (economic perspective) but combines these dimensions. Di Tella’s definition is limited on the urban society as basis what excludes several important examples, Laclau’s Definition reduces populism on a, the lower classes embracing, ideology aiming at the maintainance of power and Sachs definition combines populism with bad economic policy.

In the following, concentration will be placed on populist discourse and its effects on political parties. Before beginning this task some general remarks about the relationship of populism and political parties will be made. For the further analysis the definition of political parties as representations of a part of society will be used.

Those familiar with the political history of the region may certainly wonder why populism should have a delegitimizing effect on political parties whereas it is common knowledge that the most famous populists such as Getulio Vargas or Juan Domingo Perón strongly relied on political parties. Here we have to notice that there has to be differentiated between traditional patterns of populism as it can be found in the leadership of Vargas, Peron or Betancourt in Venezuela and the so called neopopulism represented by Fujimori, Menem or Chávez although the latter shows many features of traditional populists. One important difference between traditional and neopopulism is the role of intermediate organizations such as parties. Whereas traditional populists mostly relied on hierarchical and well structured parties neopopulism tries to mobilize society through political movements. This consist of groups without social and local coherence. They become visible in election times and are focussed solely on the political leader. Furthermore, neopopulism tries to by pass intermediate institutions in favour of a direct connection between leader and society, especially political parties (Weyland 1999a: 381). Nevertheless we have to acknowledge that also traditional populist were characterized by personalismo and the domination of the party by the political leader (Ramos Jiménez 2001: 256) and often did not resemble the requirements drawn from western types of political parties. On the other hand neopopulism as well als populism strongly rely on certain mechanisms to mobilize society. Even in neopopulism society is not the unorganised mass as it is often presented (compare Weyland 1999b) but gets included into the political system by clientelist networks, provided by populist parties or movements (De la Torre 2004). Furthermore even traditional populist parties had a delegitimizing influence on other parties. Populist parties try to stabilize the political system by their claim to political unity. As they are mass parties they need a unifying force to hold this mass together. This is provided by the concept of a unitary state and the plebicitarian legitimisation of the authority.
of the leader (Ramos Jiménez 2001: 244). Another feature of populist parties is the tendency to present themselves as the only solution to existing problems. It is obvious that this strategy leaves no space for alternative problem solvers (Ramos 2001: 100). As already mentioned political or economic crisis can be the cause of populism. Weyland shows that especially a crisis of the party system can cause populism. He analyses that enduring internal party conflicts, inclusive the switching of parties by prominent party leaders leads to loss of once loyal partisans. The latter can be easily attracted by populist outsiders (Weyland 1999a: 384). Referring to the relation of populism, neopopulism and political parties the following summary can be presented:

- Populism as well as neopopulism needs mechanisms of mobilization. Whereas populism does this over political parties neopopulism tries to by pass intermediate structures as political parties and establishes alternative structures.
- Neopopulism tries to install a direct connection between the leader and the people and therefore does not rely on the representative function of political parties. He does this by using media of mass communication.
- Populism as well as neopopulism rely on the notion of unity. They therefore negates the legitimacy of divergent interests.
- Populist parties as well as neopopulist movements present themselves as the only problem solvers and leave therefore no space for other parties
- Party weakness can give rise to populism

There has been presented a very ambivalent picture of populism/ neopopulism and political parties. On the one hand it seems that populist/ neopopulist patterns rely on a certain mechanism of mobilization. On the other hand we see that populism/ neopopulism has a delegitimizing and destabilizing effect on political parties. In the following, by analysing the political discourse of Hugo Chávez, we will see that the Venezuelan is a good example for this ambivalent relationship between populism and political parties.

**The populist discourse of Hugo Chávez**

In a populist system the political discourse plays a very important role. The relationship between the leader and society is a direct and the leader relies much on his charisma to draw legitimacy for his government. The political discourse is the perfect means to get in direct contact with the people and to transport the leaders charisma. Modern and easily available communication technologies as the mass distribution of television, internet and radio make
the direct contact between leader and society even easier and more important. Populist discourses mostly comprise the following features:

1. They heighten the people as it is the basis they draw support from. They do this by presenting the people as the downtrodden, underprivileged and as incarnation of whatever is good in society. Nevertheless the populist use of the phrase “the people” lacks any precision, that means it does not reflect existing society relations but “goes no further than the purely allusive or metaphorical level“ (Laclau 1977: 165).

2. The political focus on “the people” becomes possible by introducing the concept of the oligarchy that threatens the people and enriches themselves on the people’s expenses. The people hopes to be liberated from these forces by the populist leader. The oligarchy is not clearly defined and is presented as small minority (Boeckh/Graf 2005) A result of this lack of definition is that everybody can count himself as part of the people.

3. Populist discourses install a direct links to the people. First of all this is done by the leader addressing the masses directly. Furthermore the leader presents himself as being part of the people and therefore knowing all their sorrows. In addition the paternalistic approach to the people, presenting the leader as a father figure, caring personally for the well-being of the people is an essential element of populist discourses.

4. Populist discourse draws on a eclectic ideologist base. It can comprise religious, Marxist or Rousseauean elements. The advantage of such a discourse is the flexibility with which the discourse can be adapted to different circumstances. Furthermore it is very probable that everybody can find features in this discourse he can identify with

5. The populist discourse refers to historical events, important figures or myths and uses it as symbols people can identify with. Betancourt for example chose the figure of Juan Bimbo as prototype of the poor Venezuelan as well as the proto partisan of AD (Ellner 1999: 128).

Of course this is a general list of characteristics drawn from several cases of populism. Hugo Chávez differs somewhat from this pattern. In his discourses he praises the people, presents it as the only possible souvereign and he rails against the oligarchy. Nevertheless, Chávez has changed this pattern somehow with regard to the oligarchy. The latter is now a well defined group and has got a name. First of all the former elites belong the oligarchy. Chávez uses an anti-establishment discourse that rails against the former elites and blames them for provoking the crisis. But the oligarchy is even bigger: Chávez accuses also organized business, the church, the traditional parties and the unions to belong to the Oligarchy. We see
therefore that the definition of the people and the oligarchy as well as the definition of their relationship has changed. It has become a system where it is well defined who is a friend and who is an enemy.

Chávez directly addresses the people. As other neopopulists he relies on mechanisms of modern mass communication technology. Here the situation in Venezuela somehow differs from other neopopulisms as Chávez does not control the Venezuelan media that is dominated by the opposition. However, Chávez can rely on mass media as he moderates the weekly show “Aló presidente” that is broadcasted by the public television station “Vive”. There he addresses recent news as well common problem and presents himself as a caring father figure: everyone can call the president in his show and present local problems which are immediately solved by Hugo Chávez.

The president uses an eclectic discourse and tries to avoid any closer commitment to a specific ideology that reaches over his not closer defined concept of the “tree with the three roots” 3. The new name of the Venezuela as Bolivarian Republic itself reveals that the populism of Chávez also relies on historical figures and myths. Bolivar was always important for Venezuela but under Hugo Chávez he has become a national saint. Chávez uses quotes of Simon Bolívar to underpin all his actions and he presents himself as the incarnation of the Latin American hero of liberation (Boeckh/Graf 2005). This includes even religious connotations. Even before the rise of Hugo Chávez Simon Bolivar was treated as a second Jesus Christ, as in the following text of a song of the group Un Solo Pueblo: „When Bolívar was born, Venezuela uttered a cry that said that a second Jesus Christ had been born”, (quoted in Arenas/ Calcaño 2002: 5, translated by P.G.). Chávez plays on this theme by calling the opposition traitors of the fatherland and therefore of the principles of Simon Bolívar, and by comparing this betrayal with the betrayal of Judas on Jesus Christ at the last supper (Boeckh/Graf 2005).

To what extent have the special features of the chavist discourse a delegitimizing or destabilizing effect on political parties? I have identified the following characteristics which will be explained closer in the ongoing cause.

1. Anti-establishment discourse and vitriolic attacks against the opposition
2. Heightening of the people

3 Compare for example an Interview of Chávez in (Bilbao 2002).
3. Emphasis on a direct link between the leader and the people which leaves no place for parties
4. Delegitimization of diverging interests
5. Discourse against vertically organized parties.
6. Discreditation of representative democracy

1. As we have already shown, traditional political parties in Venezuela have discredited themselves by corruption, incompetence in crisis management, lack of party unity, inability to respond to existing cleavages. It is therefore easy for Hugo Chávez to discredit them. He does this by recalling their moral decay as shows the following passage

“[…] the constitution of 1991 was nothing than an umbrella under which the parties of the Punto Fijo found shelter, their elites, that came here during the popular hope after the 23 January of 1958 and betrayed once more the hope of the Venezuelan people. That constitution only was served the Venezuelan Elite, the political elite of the past, the same economic elite as usual and the hegemonic international forces to seize hold of the country und to throw overboard the popular hope…”(Chávez 2005, translated by P.G.)

He furthermore blames the establishment for having ridden down Venezuela: “…the perverse elites that destroyed a big part of Venezuela” (Chávez 2002, translated by P.G.). In the same direction goes the calling of the establishment of Punto Fijo as mafia: “The judicative has been exempted from the captivity it had been taken judicial mafias…” (Chávez 2002b, translated by P.G.). Chávez also blames the elite for robbery:

“…the Venezuelan People, you compatriots, has been robbed slowly, piece for piece and has been expropriated of its fundamental rights on education, health, shelter, the life itself …” (Chávez 1999, translated by P.G.).

As already mentioned not only the traditional elites are concerned by the chávist discourse. He viciously attacks the whole opposition. Especially the press, that is mainly owned by anti-Chavistas is target of the delegitimizing discourse as the following passage shows:

“The Venezuelan elites, with connections abroad, the masters of private television of Venezuela, four big television chains, that are already called at the streets, by the people… Do you know how they call them? ‘The four apocalyptic riders’. In the name of freedom of speech those who own these chains violate the truth and commanded the conspiracy and still command it because the plot has not ended” (Chávez 2003, translated by P.G.). Indeed it has to be noticed that the press itself has contributed its share to this critical view as it has often
nothing but scorn for the president. In addition we can find in certain degree biased reporting by the media insofar as they often ignore the positive aspect of Hugo Chávez’ rule (Petkoff 2005).

Another strategy to discredit the opposition is by making fun of them. Chávez does this by recalling the failed coup, their weak and ineffective resistance to Bolivarian revolution and their intern problems. Furthermore he shows them as puppets of US-interests. In the following passage for example Chávez presents members of the Opposition as too cowardly to reveal their partisanship:

“People of parties that do not like that one knows that they belong to these parties. Its like in the last interview that you made to the other candidate. There you welcomed him: ‘Welcome candidate of the AD, COPEI, Proyecto Venezuela’ and this men whispered: ‘don’t call me like this” (Chávez 1999, translated by P.G.).

The anti establishment-discourse and the attack against the opposition have two effects. First it discredits this group by recalling their decay and their weaknesses. But as has been noticed earlier this delegitimation strategy will on the long term lead to a delegitimation of the concept of political parties as a whole.

Of course there exist also attempts to include the opposition. But as the following quotation shows even these do not present Antichavistas as supporters of a legitime interest but as sons that went astray but are always welcome in their fathers house.

“It take the chance and make a call to the whole nation, we have come together today to demonstrate that we are governing the whole nation, that we are not sectarian, we open the arms inclusively for those Venezuelans who have been in the opposition. We don not care, com with us, we are brothers and you are our brothers. If you have been confused, frightened, wrong doesn’t matter, we all can commit faults but it is wise to correct them.. To the sectors of the upper middle class, to sectors that have been making campaign behind false leaders, demagogues, come, this government also waits for you” (Chávez 2005, translated by P.G.).

2. As in all populist discourses we find that Chávez often puts “the people” above everything and presents it as the only sovereign: “The people is the one who has to control the powers” (Chávez 2006, translated by P.G.). Another time we find here religious elements as he calls the Venezuelans as the chosen people. “…you are the people most noble of the world, because you are the bravest people of the world…” (Chávez 2002a). He also calls on the people by highlighting the marginal role it played under Punto Fijo:
“….the minorities that controlled the political power, that controlled the economic power…that made of Venezuela what they wanted…now we have full democracy in Venezuela, not that what they called democracy during 40 and some years, that was a democracy of the elites, of a minority, a democracy without the people is no democracy” (Chávez 2002a, translated by P.G.).

Referring to the people as the sovereign is a very important feature of the discourse of Hugo Chávez and, as has been shown, is a means that can be characterized as populist. At first glance, referring to the people as sovereign does not appear evil, but rather the essence of every democracy; it would be desirable that heads of western democracies would also show a bit more esteem for the role the people plays or should play in democracy. But in the case of Hugo Chávez this means something different: he is presenting society as a homogenous mass. He is thereby reaching the same effect as by his strategy of delegitimizing the opposition: he negates that there could be legitimate diverging interests and that society has a pluralistic structur. He therefore is delegitimizing everyone who claims to represent diverging interests. Therefore, those who cannot identify with Hugo Chávez do not belong to the people and have no place in Venezuelan society anymore.

3. Chávez creates a direct link between him and the people by presenting himself as being property of the people: “I came here to stay and there will be no power, no medial campaign or something other that can tear me out of your soul, because it is real that I do not belong to myself any more, I belong to today and forever and I will devote myself to you for the rest of my life ...(Chávez 2002a, translated by P.G.). He also uses metaphors to strengthen this connection:

“All Venezuelans, the ship is Venezuela, the ship is Venezuela and you are the majority of the passengers of this ship and the proprietors of this ship, you have contracted me to be your captain for a while, I’m already staying here for six years, please excuse the bad things, I excuse myself for the failures and I promise you that I will commit no failures while I’m in office“ (Chávez 2005, translated by P.G.). That the strategy of creating an direct connection between Chávez and the people works, shows following phrase often chanted by the people by public rallies: “Chávez our friend, the people is with you!” (Chávez 2002a, translated by P.G.).

The effect of such a discourse is the strengthening of participatory forms of democracy at the cost of representative forms of democracy. But Chávez also attacks directly representative democracy, which will be discussed at a later point.
4. As has already been noticed, Chávez in his discourses places the people above everything and criticizes the opposition. But he also goes much further and creates a strict polarization of good and evil in an even more direct way. He presents Venezuela as a place where everyone who is against the Bolivarian revolution is on a metaphorical fast track to hell: „We’re in Apocalyptic times, there’s no middle ground. Either you are with God or you are with the Devil and we are with God” (quotated by Roberts 2003: 70).

Chávez also attacks political parties as representations of diverging interests and therefore uses quotations from Simón Bolívar to underpin this: “If my dead contributes to the end of parties” (Chávez 2000, translated by P.G.). The intention of Chávez is not to do away with political parties per se and such an insinuation should not be understood in this paper. However, by pointing on the danger that insists political parties that represent only parts of society, he points on the danger to national unity of any organization of the type that corresponds common definitions of political parties.

On the other hand, Chávez recognizes that everyone has the right to defend his or her “truths”: “I want the be the friend of all and therefore, as I defend my truths, you have the right to defend your ones, but try to stay with the truth: try not to fall back to the same manipulations as usual” (Chávez 1999). At first glance, there seems nothing objectionable in this phrase: In the Fifth Republic, everyone who does not lie or cheat, can defend his or her opinion. But who defines that somebody is lying and not telling the truth? And how can we trust those who have already been accused by the president of having cheated in the past?

5. In the Chavist discourse we also find a direct anti-party discourse. In the following passage he states, on the one hand, that political parties are imperative for any democracy, and, on the other hand, he rejects political parties that have the classical party features: „Everything is relative, the parties as long as they are an instrument of political organisation, of participation, a space for discussion, for the analysis and the generation of ideologies, for the generation of politics, as long as they practice intern democracy, the consults, the tolerance, where ethical values dominate, as such the party is indispensable; but if it concerns a small organized minority, with iron discipline, that functions vertically, where other interests, of persons of groups, dominate, the party is an obstacle for the democracy”. (quotated in Lalander 2004: 71).

6. Although intermediate mechanisms still exist in the 5. Republic, for example the system of the bolivarian circles, and Chávez strongly relies on those mechanisms, he also comes out directly against representative democracy, as shown the following passage:
“Design a participatory and protagonist democracy: that’s the task that comes now and it corresponds us all, because now it’s not only about a representative democracy, that lies behind” (Chávez 2000, translated by P.G.). In this passage he presents representative democracy as something that has been overcome by the Venezuelan people. Furthermore he associates representative democracy with the past and therefore with party decay. As Jiménez states Chávez is constructing an opposition between participatory democracy and representative democracy (Ramos Jiménez 2001: 100).

**Conclusion**

As has been shown, the Venezuelan party system has undergone fundamental changes in less than two decades. Having once been the example for a stable party system, it counts on political parties that are highly unstable. Among those, some are only the shadow of their former selves. Furthermore, we have seen that the attitude towards political parties has fundamentally changed. Political parties are only seen as one – and surely not the best – option to articulate interests. Some even doubt the indispensability of political parties. I share with many scholars the opinion that this development has its causes in the decay of political parties in the past as well as the meagre performance of the opposition forces at the present. Nevertheless, the analysis of political discourse has shown that the political discourse has worked as a catalysing force in the following way:

- The political discourse is full of anti-establishment and anti-opposition topics. It therefore sped up the decay of political parties in the past and exhibits their meagre performance in the present. As the discreditation of special parties sooner or later leads to the refusal of parties as a concept by society, the political discourses actively contributes to the weakening of political parties.
- The elevation of the people evokes the image of a monistic and homogeneous society. It thereforenegates the basis on which parties are grounded, namely the existence of divergent interests and the need to articulate them.
- The 5. Republic has become a sharply defined system with a very clear friend-enemy pattern. Divergent interests are automatically illegitimate. This leads to an enormous polarization of society where only two sides are represented and are defended ardently by their supporters.
- The organizational form of traditional political parties as well as representative democracy are rejected. Both are presented as being per se inferior to participatory or plebiscitary
elements of democracy. In the discourse of Hugo Chávez, they are also discredited by being associated with the decay of Punto Fijo.

The preceding comments let one presume that the prospects of political parties in Venezuela are not very rosy at the moment. The parties that support Hugo Chávez have only fragile internal structures and depend highly on the person of Hugo Chávez. The opposition parties are bound in internal struggles and are fixated upon the removal of Hugo Chávez. They hardly bother with offering a real electoral alternative to voters. A truly positive effect of the Fifth Republic is that the underprivileged have gotten a voice and that their needs are respected, at least to some extent. Nevertheless, Venezuela is far from being a participatory democracy, as noted by Molina:

“The decay of the political parties has not given way to a higher-level participatory democracy but to a period of severe instability in which democracy itself has been at risk” (Molina 2004: 178).

However, it is also far away from having a stable party system and being a representative democracy. If participatory democracy will break its way through or if the party system can be reinstitutionalised is uncertain.

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