

DECENTRALIZATION AND THE PARTY SYSTEM IN VENEZUELA

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I. INTRODUCTION

On the December 3, 1989, Venezuelans for the first time in the country's history went to the polls to directly elect their local and regional political leaders. An important decentralization process was subsequently initiated with the elections of municipal mayors and state governors. Since then, a number of non-traditional political parties have emerged and developed, like the socialist MAS (*Movimiento Al Socialismo*) and Causa R (*Causa Radical*).¹ These two parties have triumphed in several municipalities and federal states in the elections of mayors and governors, thus seriously threatening the almost hegemonic position of the two Venezuelan traditional parties – i.e. social democratic AD (*Acción Democrática*) and Christian democratic COPEI (*Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente*). Both AD and COPEI, the country's main political organizations since its democratization in 1958, have by tradition been strongly centralized parties. For more than three decades they dominated national politics, often through strategic pacts and alliances. Between 1973 and 1988, the two parties together captured between 80% and 93% of the total votes cast in every presidential election. With the municipal, regional and national elections in 1998 and 2000, the political panorama underwent even more dramatic changes. Several entirely new political parties have emerged, most notably the MVR (*Movimiento V República*) of current President Hugo Chávez Frías, but also parties like *Proyecto Venezuela*, with roots in the industrial state of Carabobo and its capital Valencia, and *Primero Justicia*, rooted in the greater Caracas area. A fundamental hypothesis in this study is that the decentralization process has contributed strongly to changes in the structure of the Venezuelan party system. A main purpose here is therefore to examine these changes within the post-1989 party system. Since we deal with a two-party system rupture, some words are needed on

the conditions party systems tend to collapse. Henry Dietz and David Myers present a three-part model on the probabilities of party system collapse or weakening.

1. Some kind of acute and long-lived crisis (e.g. economic or social),
2. The parties of the system are perceived as incapable to confront the crisis, and:
3. An alternative party or leader is considered as attractive as an option.

The authors suggest that a collapse of a party system is most likely when a combination of these factors occur (Dietz & Myers 2003:3). I argue that these ideas do not conflict with the implications of a decentralization reform on a party system, since the first two factors can function as a pressure for reform. Furthermore, once introduced decentralization, local and regional leaders can be perceived as options to the previously dominant party/parties.

Three fundamental conditions are often mentioned while discussing decentralization: the existence of territorial units to administrate, the right of the citizens to select their own regional/local political leaders, and the auto-financing capacity of the distinct political-territorial unities. Decentralization in the Latin American countries² was probably introduced both as a result of an increasing political discontent among the population as the economic crisis deepened, and as important steps in the reforms of State democratization. At the same time, multilateral banks also pronounced strong pressure for decentralization as a basic condition when economic support was given. In this continental context Peter Spink concludes that the Venezuelan decentralization process has been one of the more successful ones in the continent, and stands out as the most powerful as for immediate impacts (Spink 1998:142-144).

II. PARTYARCHY

From a democratic point of view, post-1958 Venezuela has shown some basic characteristics of a democratic system, such as party and organization plurality, right for the citizens to vote and a judicial system independent from the government. Voting has been made an easy procedure. The State structure comprises a balance of powers between legislative, executive and judicial branches, but in the practice the executive is completely dominating. The political rules of the game were established through the *Punto Fijo* Pact in 1958. In the Pact, the two political parties together with the most influential representatives of the

Venezuelan societal sectors agreed on principles of the political system and the methods to avoid efficient rivalry both from the Left and the Right. The political system since then can be described as a multi-party democracy, but until 1989 AD and COPEI have governed. Political stability has been achieved through a party mediated clientelistic system, where the parties with access to the economic resources of the State have provided social and economic support to distinct social groups, such as peasant and workers organizations. This system of strongly dominant political parties in Venezuela is referred to as Partyarchy (*Partidocracia*)³, with penetration of organized social and political activities. Michael Coppedge, in his brilliant work on the behavior, functioning and structure of the AD party in a democratic Venezuela, refers to Venezuela as the most extreme case of partyarchy in the democratic world. That is: “a democracy where political parties monopolize the formal political process and politicize society along party lines” (Coppedge 1994:18; Diamond 1999:96-97). Many analysts agree that until the late 1980’s, Venezuela had one of the strongest party systems (if not the strongest) among Latin American countries.⁴ Furthermore, drawing on Robert Dahl’s classic on Polyarchy, Coppedge illustratively compares: “If democracy is government of the people, by the people, for the people, then partyarchy is government of the people, by the parties, for the parties” (Coppedge 1994:2,15, 17-22).

III. DECENTRALIZATION TO CONFRONT THE PARTYARCHIC CRISIS

To confront a deepening legitimacy and credibility crisis of the Venezuelan political and party systems (as the economic crisis got worse), a Presidential Commission for State Reform, COPRE (*Comisión Presidencial Para la Reforma del Estado*) was created in 1984. The commission included representatives from the political parties, distinct interest groups, and intellectuals. It had six principal objectives: political reforms, decentralization, development of civil society, and modernization of administration, the legal system, and of public policies. The political scientist, Michael Penfold-Becerra, underlines that the decentralization reform did not only aim at democratization, but also (more indirectly) an ambition to reduce the power of the political actors at the central level (Penfold-Becerra 2000:14-15) – i.e. changing the internal party structures also. He quotes a COPRE member: “the movement towards decentralization of the State would necessarily imply a decrease of the discretionality within the political party cúpulas (tops). With the decrease of centralization, the discretionality of the national directories of the political parties would also decrease” (Penfold-Becerra 2000:14-15).

Or, as Brian Crisp puts it: "...the parties had become pragmatic and corrupt machines beyond the reach of democratic and ethic controls"(Crisp 2000:190).

Returning to Coppedge's reasoning on partyarchy, it is quite close to reach the conclusion that an indirect objective of the reform was to reduce the partyarchic features of the system. Partyarchy had thus become a recognized problem. It is particularly interesting to examine how the distinct political actors (especially within the parties) reacted to the decentralization of the political system. With such a perspective, the decentralization reforms appear to have resulted semi-suicidal for AD and COPEI, since these processes functioned as an opening of the political and State arenas. How can we understand the acceptance of the decentralization reforms within the AD leadership?

With a centralized and two-party political system, voters logically consider voting outside the dominating two parties a waste (wasted-vote scenario). But, with a decentralized system votes for smaller parties might be more worth, with the possibility to reach political representation at the municipal or regional levels. In a traditional partyarchy the political opportunities presented by decentralization and the opening of the political system are most evident. As Michael Coppedge argues:

"In other societies, some nonparty organizations have enough autonomy to focus their issues and place them on the agenda. In a partyarchy, in which parties are practically the only organizations that can define the terms of the political debate, the agenda is set by political parties alone. The politically penetrated class, sectoral, and regional organizations can express only the interests that have passed through the filter of party interest" (Coppedge 1994:42-43).

IV. WHY DECENTRALIZATION IN 1989?

The year 1989 in Venezuela includes both historic and symbolic changes, rupture of traditions and values, not only related to decentralization and its implications on the political system as a whole. Directly related to the changes in political behavior and preferences among the Venezuelans were also a new macroeconomic approach by the government in 1989, resulting in mass riots in protest against the contents of the economic program, remembered among Venezuelans as the *Caracazo*. Most scholars believe that Venezuelan's attitudes toward the democratic system as a whole and its institutions and representatives, changed drastically in 1989. The Venezuelan Jesuit priest and political scientist, Arturo Sosa, argues that a prolonged breakdown of the traditional political party system was manifested between the Caracazo riots and the elections of 1998. For Sosa, the legitimacy crisis of the

political system was based in the difficulty among the citizens to understand their decreasing socio-economic conditions of life.⁵ There are several direct or indirect connections between the decentralization processes and the sociopolitical and socioeconomic pressure that became evident from 1989 onwards. Decentralization was introduced after a decade of economic recession and worsened socioeconomic conditions for the population. Another important factor why the crisis became so difficult from the early 1980's was that the Venezuelan civil society had become more complex than earlier when practically the only interest groups to satisfy were business and labor. New organizations and groups appeared and had problems in having their voices heard due to the closure of the political system. In this context, the Venezuelan State itself was to consider as the initiator of decentralization, even if the growing pressure from below at the same time contributed. The super-centralization of the State had seriously damaged the efficiency of regional institutions, since it must have been difficult for the central government to exactly know how and when new economic resources were needed in the distinct states (i.e., the efficiency argument of decentralization). What had been the strength of the political and democratic systems through the partyarchic model in the long run also provided destabilizing effects. Jaime Lusinchi (AD) had reached the presidency of the nation on the promises of a "Pact for Social Democracy", in which he promised a political opening and a dialogue between the parties and the civil society; that is, recognizing that *partyarchy* and the traditional pact-strategies were problems.

V. DECENTRALIZATION: A PANACEA FOR ALL POLITICAL ILLS?

In the mid-1980's, both AD and COPEI were under increasing pressure for a long time from their regional party bases which struggled for access to power by questioning party loyalty. Nelly Arenas and Carlos Mascareño argue that this pressure made the decentralization reforms possible, including the direct elections of mayors and governors. The constant pressure from the regions gave birth to new ideas, projects and aspirations among the regional party militants, with a new functioning model of the states that differed from the ruling centralist paradigm (Arenas & Mascareño 1997:40-41). The ambitions of COPRE to democratize the internal party structure were long resisted in AD and COPEI with the arguments of being in emergency situations.

"The traditional leadership of the governing party saw, correctly, that the reforms had the potential to change the rules of the political game, and thus the prevailing distribution of power" (López Maya 1997:120).

As for the legitimating of minority factions within the party MAS had pioneered already in the 1970's as protest against monolithic traditions and centralist party machines of the traditional parties. Although all three parties have modified their statutes as a consequence of the COPRE reforms (and particularly decentralization) for the decision-making power at municipal and regional state level within the parties (Ellner 1996:92-93). In AD, the Lusinchí faction (the "*Lusinchistas*" or "*Conservadores*") used its majority in Congress to postpone direct elections of governors and mayors. It was first when Carlos Andrés Pérez (CAP) – the leader of the other AD faction called the "*perecistas*", "*renovators*" or "*reformistas*" – had taken over the presidency in 1989, that political and administrative decentralization reforms were approved. When Pérez took office, the Organic Law of Decentralization, Delimitation and Transfer of Competences -LODDT- (Ley Orgánica para la Descentralización, Delimitación y Transferencia de Competencias) was finally approved and immediately opened a polemic debate between the centralists versus decentralizers. In this bitter factional polarization in AD, CAP took advantage of his relations with the younger grassroots party leaders and used decentralization to offer both them and the opposition parties political space and representation as a sort of political compromise (Penfold-Becerra 1997:18-23).

Leaders from all political parties defended decentralization (at one time or another) idealizing the municipal and neighborhood political levels. These positions contributed to the strengthening of the local government at the municipal level, and several grassroots leaders succeeded in having new municipalities recognized from 1989 onwards (Ellner 1993-94:20). Taking a game-theoretic approach to decentralization in the context of municipal fragmentation, the traditionally centralized COPEI considered that political decentralization would improve their electoral turnouts. MAS too saw new political and electoral opportunities within these reforms (Penfold-Becerra 1997:18). Interestingly, Bautista Urbaneja mentions AD as a successful example with respect to the ability to redesign the internal party structure. He adds that AD managed to change structure and routines more or less generally. Through this adaptation, AD successively abandoned its Leninist party structure tradition (Bautista Urbaneja 1998:47-48).⁶ To illustrate the political weight of the decentralization in the 1988 presidential elections, the COPEI candidate Eduardo Fernández spoke about the urgent need of decentralization and proposed direct elections of governors and mayors. The day after, Carlos Andrés Pérez of AD openly made this electoral promise his (Bautista Urbaneja 1998:40). On the other hand, in COPEI,

ex-president Luis Herrera Campíns directly opposed the opening of the political system (Mascareño 2000:24).⁷

VI. THE FIRST DECENTRALIZED ELECTIONS OF 1989-1995

On the December 3, 1989, Venezuelans went to the polls to elect state governors, municipality mayors and council members. In the elections of the 20 state governors 53 parties participated with a total of 97 candidates. Although five parties shared the 20 governances, of these AD and COPEI together captured 17. MAS, Causa R and MEP (Movimiento Electoral del Pueblo) triumphed in one state each. It might be seen as a continuation of the bipartisan tradition and that AD and COPEI calculated well according to the game theories related to decentralization. On the other hand, the three states where the “newer” parties won, Aragua, Bolívar and Anzoátegui, are among the most important industrial states of the nation. As for the regional political force of MAS in Aragua, the seven of the nationally eleven municipal victories of MAS, were in Aragua. In these elections, COPEI obtained six municipalities and AD only two (Carrasquero & Welsch 1991:15). In one of the first analyses made on the results of the elections of 1989, Carrasquero & Welsch emphasize a common characteristic of the three electoral levels, namely the variety of alliances. Of the 20 elected governors, 17 represented more than one party, as well as 148 of the 269 elected mayors. At the municipality council level, though, this feature was weaker, only 377 of the totally 1963 posts counted with alliances (Ibid.: 13-14).

Table 1 - Decentralized Elections in Venezuela 1989-1995*

Year:	1989		1992		1995	
Party	Governors	Mayors	Governors	Mayors	Governors	Mayors
AD	11	152	7	128	12	184
COPEI	6	104	11	121	3	100
MAS	1	9	3	19	4	13
MEP	1	n.a.	-	n.a.	-	n.a.
Causa R	1	2	1	5	1	8
Convergencia	-	-	-	-	1	10
Pr.Carabobo	-	-	-	-	1	3
Total:	20	269	22	282	22	330

Source: Buxton (2001:117); Carrasquero & Welsch, (1991:13-15); Crisp & Levine (1998:46); ODCA (1996:110-118).

* The exact figures are not available due to the formation of intra-party alliances.

The states of Aragua and Bolívar are mentioned as the cases where the regional character of the candidates for the state governorship was as

most significant (Carlos Tablante for MAS in Aragua, and Andrés Velásquez for Causa R in Bolívar). The economic historian, Steve Ellner, suggests that the regional victories of Tablante and Velásquez largely were due to their own reputation, more than the back up of the party. Like Velásquez in Bolívar, Tablante initiated a war against corruption and clientelism and showed a great regional interest. Tablante disappointed some of his party colleagues by refusing them top positions within the governorship (Ellner 1993:149-151). At the same time, cross-party collaboration on the distinct political-territorial levels has increased with decentralization, beyond the traditional AD-COPEI pacts and alliances. Already in 1990, governors from AD, COPEI, Causa R and MAS made an agreement. They agreed to meet every six months and to promote the acceleration of the decentralization process. The executive of the central government under Carlos Andrés Pérez was fast in supporting this project and to try to prevent collective action problems. Nevertheless, governors and the executive met forceful resistance from Congress (Penfold Becerra 1997:31-33). Also, the traditional parties suffered at the regional state level. In 1990, the governors of the party reclaimed that the AD central leadership paid too little attention to the new process (Arenas & Mascareño 1997:43).

In the 1992 elections, the MAS and COPEI parties stand out like winners. Both increased the number of governorships and mayoralities. Also Causa R managed to grow on the municipal level. Although at the national level the trend of AD-COPEI domination continued, but with an internal redistribution of success between the two in favor of COPEI. But, in various states, like Aragua and Bolívar, MAS and Causa R repeated with Tablante and Velásquez. The MAS party expanded in the regional and local elections. The deepened credibility crisis within the traditional political parties played in the hands of Causa R, that with an aggressive anti-party and anti-establishment approach found popular support also in other societal sectors.

VII. THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS OF 1993: FROM TWO-PARTYISM TO MULTIPARTYISM

Since the introduction of direct elections of mayors and governors, the results of these elections have served the bigger parties as a thermometer before the presidential ones. So also in the presidential elections of 1993, where several of the candidates for the presidency were successful and popular state governors, most notably Andrés Velásquez of Causa R, but also Oswaldo Álvarez Paz of COPEI. Claudio Fermín of AD was earlier mayor of Caracas. Within COPEI, decentralization has

clearly changed the power structures of the party. Before the presidential elections of 1993, when Alvarez Paz was chosen to represent the party, the most influential factor in that decision was his record as governor of the Zulia state (Arenas & Mascareño 1997:44).

Table 2 - Presidential Elections of 1993 (percentage)

Candidate	Party	Presidential vote	Congress votes
Rafael Caldera	Conv./MAS	30.5	24.4
Claudio Fermín	AD	23.6	28.8
Oswaldo Alvarez Paz	COPEI	22.7	27.2
Andrés Velásquez	Causa R	21.9	19.6

Source: Lalander (2002).

With the victory of the Caldera alliance in 1993, AD and COPEI for the first time since 1958 lost control over the presidency. First of all a fragmentation and a heavy volatility of the party system is apparent if we compare with the election results of 1998 (when AD and COPEI together captured around 93% of the votes (AD 53 and COPEI 40)).⁸ Molina categorizes the period from 1993 as a polarized and de-institutionalized pluralism (Molina 2002:4). The difference in obtained votes is indeed almost minimal between AD, COPEI and Causa R. Caldera's party alone would have ended fourth, but with the 10% of MAS and the alliance with other mainly leftist parties, they gathered enough support to win. Many critical voices state that really Andrés Velásquez would have triumphed, but manipulations, sabotages and burning of electoral ballot boxes (*actas*):

“We believe that we won the elections with Andrés [Velásquez], although, due to electoral manipulations and lack of courage among some of our leading militants, we missed that opportunity”.⁹

Some critics hold that AD militants with access to the electoral centres changed entire boxes of supposed Causa R votes for AD ballots to not make the electoral humiliation so hard.¹⁰ Although I do not aim at any statement saying that without fraud Causa R would have won. But, as several anonymous informants expressed: “On one of the Venezuelan television channels, they have the tradition on the days of elections to show a picture of the winning candidate in the beginning of the vignette of the program in 1993 Andrés Velásquez appeared first.”¹¹ But one academic authority on Venezuelan electoral studies, José Molina, holds that: “No, that is not true, Caldera won, no doubt about it. However people keep saying that Andrés had more votes, but even if some traps were set, some ballot boxes changed etc., the total amount of valid votes

for Caldera and the alliance was enough to beat Causa R.”¹² Julia Buxton holds that Causa R was perceived as a dangerous threat to AD and COPEI, with their electoral promises of radical reforms of the political structures. “In that instance, electoral fraud and changes in the electoral strategies of AD and COPEI averted a potential LCR [La Causa Radical] victory” (Buxton 2001:5). Indeed, the hypothetical departure of the present study would have been easier to defend if the radicals had reached the presidency, a sort of schoolbook example of a political movement going from micro to macro level and from protest to proposal (using the terminology of Fals Borda).¹³ Former Causa R deputy José Albornóz agrees on my assumptions that decentralization since 1989 signified an opportunity for them to enter the political system from below, that is, the municipalities and the regional states. “Doing a good job there in Bolívar, we got national reputation as an option to the traditional corrupt elites [AD and COPEI].”¹⁴

Nevertheless, returning to what could be assumed to be a shaky government coalition (a former COPEI leader backed up by MAS and other leftist groups). Even if the Caldera alliance formed government, there existed a tacit and sometimes open alliance between AD and Caldera, which meant that the AD was allowed spaces in State institutions and administration, i.e. protected by Caldera. So, despite being officially independent, Caldera was not in practice directly hostile to the traditional political parties (even if he won the election among others with his anti-traditionalism discourse and defense of the coup-makers around Chávez in 1992). George Philip reveals that a few months after taking position in 1994, Caldera closed the Congress in order to sit down and negotiate with AD’s parliamentary leaders. At one moment, Caldera pronounced to an intimate parliamentary associate that the country needed strong parties, and that he wanted to help AD, since he virtually had succeeded in destroying his old party (COPEI) (Philip 2000:30). Myers reveals how Caldera aimed at isolating and marginalizing his “ungrateful children” in COPEI, after being himself outmanoeuvred in the party. He offered AD’s Alfaro Ucero a deal, providing them the necessary patronage to satisfy their clients. Alfaro Ucero (who agreed to the deal) had to secure on his behalf that AD supported the Caldera government in Congress. In Myers’ words; “AD gave its blessing to Caldera’s plan to dismember COPEI” (Myers, 2003: 23-24). Even if the Caldera alliance formed government, there existed a tacit and sometimes open alliance between AD and Caldera, which meant that the AD was allowed space in State institutions and administration, i.e. protected by Caldera (Lalander, 2002). Additionally, AD and COPEI together had majority in Congress. In this

context, AD and COPEI were extremely dependent on regional and local alliances with other parties, and, as Philip puts it, they now fitted better for the epithet “traditional” parties, than “dominant”. They still controlled the Congress, most governorships, mayoralties, much of the State apparatus, and “a good deal of the money” (Philip 2000:27).

VIII. WHY THE LEFTIST PARTIES SPEARHEAD DECENTRALIZATION

It might not be so surprising that the MAS and Causa R parties have been spearheading the Venezuelan decentralization. Jorge Castañeda has studied the evolution of the Latin American leftist parties and holds that: "As the left wins mayoralties, it becomes more convinced of the virtues of decentralization and municipal democracy. As it bestows greater priority upon these issues, it will in all likelihood win more towns and cities" (Castañeda 1993:371). Castañeda mentions that even former guerrilla fighters (like some of the MAS and Causa R activists) are convinced of the importance of municipal democracy. As for the traditional elitist characteristic in Latin American parties, this is most valid for the development of leftist parties. The party elites tend to play a main character in party changes and new political approaches within leftist parties. MAS was among the first parties to promote the regional leadership already in the early 1970's. Although the political scientist Diego Bautista Urbaneja is critical, and supposes that MAS saw the political opportunities that decentralization offered as an emergency exit to save the party from its national crisis (Bautista Urbaneja 1998:47). The MAS decentralization of leadership contributed to an increased internal ideological division. While the faction of Tablante in Aragua promoted continued decentralization, other leaders argued that decentralization had gone too far. Tablante was criticized for, among others, having come to terms with elite groups in Aragua to strengthen his regional leadership. One can also question the consistency of the party, since MAS allied with AD in some states and with COPEI in others (Ellner 1996:101-103). Furthermore, the MAS support of Caldera from 1994 led to increasing discontent within the party, especially since Caldera carried through reforms backed up by AD in Congress, and decentralization was halted during the period. The initially even more regional Causa R, in 1993 presented decentralization as a necessary feature of a democratic system. "Democracy implies decentralization. This means bringing power of decision from sovereignty and autocracy to the people, so that the people through participation become decisive of the programs, its leaders and operations" (La Causa R 1993). Castañeda argues that decentralization

reforms have both advantages and disadvantages, although they normally urge leftist parties to spearhead them (Castañeda 1996:108).

IX. THE CHÁVEZ MOVEMENT MBR-200

The Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement 200, MBR-200 (*Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario –200*) was formed in 1983 and the name alludes to the 200th anniversary of the birth of Liberator Simón Bolívar. The political approach of MBR-200 can be described as nationalist and populist in its anti-establishment strategies. Officially the program of the movement is based on "Bolivarianism" (the ideas of Bolívar), a general struggle against corruption and the urgent need to install a moral public power (beside the traditional executive, legislative and judicial powers) and a major popular participation. The MBR movement was strengthened in 1989 as it took advantage of the critical situation related to the Caracazo disturbances, criticizing "the corrupt elites" to use the Armed Forces to massacre the people.¹⁵ Before the regional and municipal elections of 1995, the MBR-200 movement, led by Hugo Chávez (just released from prison), initiated a political tour through the Venezuelan states with the exhortation of active electoral abstention, with a direct popular message to boycott the decentralized elections: "*Por ahora por ninguno*" (At the moment For Nobody).¹⁶ Chávez explains that an objective of this abstention campaign was to promote a political mobilization, and it likewise served as protest against the traditional partisan politics. The abstention rose to its highest level ever in the democratic history of Venezuela (Blanco Muñoz 1998:301-306). At the same time, Comandante Fransisco Arias Cárdenas, the brother in arms of Chávez during the first Coup attempt in 1992, decided to enter the democratic game via the new decentralized rules. He was elected governor for the important "oil-state" of Zulia, where he in 1992 had held Governor Oswaldo Alvarez Paz hostage in his own home. Arias represented an alliance consisting of both Causa R and COPEI. The Chávez wing of MBR-200 criticized him for participation within a corrupt State. For George Philip, Chávez took advantage of the political opening created by the deepening crisis of the traditional parties and particularly the increased lack of respect towards these parties and the surrounding political system (Philip 2000:1-2).

Venezuelan Protest Cycles

AD and COPEI managed to dominate Venezuelan politics relatively unquestioned for more than two decades, a lot thanks to their access to the petrodollars and privileged position to distribute these

resources among the population and interest groups. Daniel Levine uses some of Sidney Tarrow's ideas of political opportunity structures, and he explains that prehistorically the protest cycles in Venezuela have no unique point of departure or vehicle of control:

“Protests and challenges pop up here and there, not just in response to the ”exhaustion of the model” but also in search of voice, expression, and participation. (...) Some of these efforts persist and consolidate while others fade, but... they share a core political agenda. It is as if a mirror were held up to the party system and the rules by which it lived. If we recall the centralized, hierarchical character of the party system, and its reliance on heavily financed state-party links with powerful leaders making deals behind closed doors, the contrast is all the more striking. Protesters and reformers seek greater access and participation, and make their case in campaigns against corruption and elite impunity”.¹⁷

The Caracazo riots and the popular sympathy that Hugo Chávez and the other rebel officers enjoyed after the coup attempts were clear manifestations of the general popular political and social discontentment. Penfold-Becerra makes a most interesting and evident direct link between the military coup attempts in 1992 and the decentralization process. Between 1989 and 1992 no transferences of responsibilities was approved, despite demands and pressure by the governors. But, after the coup attempt in February 1992, opposition politicians took advantage of the new political climate provoked and put in evidence by the coup attempt. Two of the most forceful critics were governors Tablante and Velásquez (Penfold-Becerra 1997:32-34).

The Party System at Crossroads: The Elections of 1998

The most recent bigger political changes related to decentralization occurred through the regional, municipal and national elections of 1998 and 2000. As in the presidential elections of 1993, the majority of the candidates presented successful experiences within the decentralization processes. Henrique Salas Römer had been governor of the Carabobo state for two periods, representing the Proyecto Carabobo. As governor, Salas Römer had grown popular through the development of job opportunity projects and domestic and international economic investment. Carabobo became perceived as an attractive zone for investment thanks to the efficient government of Salas Römer. Salas has been one of the most persistent promoters of continued and deepened decentralization.¹⁸ The presidential candidate that until a year before the elections seemed to

already have the triumph in her hands according to the electoral preference surveys, was ex-mayor Irene Sáez. She won the elections for the Caracas mayoralty of Chacao in 1992 and was re-elected in 1995 (backed up by both AD and COPEI). Her municipal government was characterized by a close collaboration with civil society organizations. As Michael Kulisheck points out, Sáez was seen as an efficient and honest political leader. Her achievements in reforming the authorities of sanity, police and ambulance forces are well known. The popular hope put in Sáez before the elections was that her successful experiences in Chacao could be extended to whole Venezuela (Kulisheck 1999:81). Salas Römer campaigned with the national extension of the Proyecto Carabobo party, now named Proyecto Venezuela. Sáez, on the other hand, presented a new party IRENE, initials that stood for: "Integration, Representation and New Hope" (Integración, Representación y Nueva Esperanza). Early in 1998, she accepted an electoral alliance backed up principally by the Causa R. Although, soon afterwards she accepted to represent also COPEI, which led to the withdrawal of the radicals from Irene's campaign. The acceptance of the COPEI partnership coincided with the rapid growth in popularity of Chávez.¹⁹

Traditional Parties in Crisis

The traditional political elite (AD and COPEI) was mainly blamed for all societal ills and this strategy was convenient for the opposition to use to gain popular support. For Moisés Naím, the rupture of Venezuelan two-party hegemonic system was the result of too many weak political actors, and not too few strong, that is, a fragmentation of the political power (Naím 2000).²⁰ Both COPEI and MAS suffered from deep ideological and factionalist divisions before the elections of 1998. COPEI was still psychologically crippled by the electoral humiliations of both 1993 and 1995. The division was evidently of generational character, with a bitter antagonism between the historical leadership and younger renovators. The symbolic hole created by the leave of the ideological leader Rafael Caldera contributed to the crisis, and many ex-*copeyanos* followed Caldera to Convergencia in 1993. Others joined the political movements around Irene Sáez and Henrique Sálas Römer. The MAS party suffered from weakening signs and factionalism as consequences of the participation in the Caldera alliance. On the one hand, the historical ideological leader and MAS co-founder Teodoro Petkoff was a key minister (of planning), but on the other, the popular MAS leaders Leopoldo Puchi and Felipe Mujica acted most critically towards the government in Congress. As for Causa R, internal conflicts and

decreasing popular support had characterized the movement since the mid 1990's. In June 1997 Causa R party divided due to conflicts between the Andrés Velásquez and Pablo Medina factions respectively (with origin in differing positions towards the coup attempt of 1992). A few months later the Medina faction presented a new party, Patria Para Todos –PPT- (Fatherland For All), which included a majority of the Causa R parliamentary deputies. MAS was together with the PPT one of the first political parties to ally with the Chávez movement during the electoral campaign of 1997-98 and as a direct consequence the party divided between pro-*chavistas* and contra-*chavistas*. Petkoff decided to leave the party because of the alliance with Chávez.

The Regional Elections of 1998

The November 8 elections were held for governances, legislative assemblies and deputies for the National Congress. It is important to mention that due to the same fear of having Chávez as President, AD, COPEI and Convergencia had unified in Congress to reach a separation between the regional and the presidential elections, which according to the initial plans would have coincided. One objective of the separation of electoral dates was to enable AD (and probably COPEI too) to use their stronger party machines to reach better results in the regional elections in November, which according to the plans would create a psychological advantage before the December presidential elections. Comparing the results of the elections, the separation strategy of AD and COPEI partly functioned, since the parties scored a lot higher in the elections for governors than in the presidential ones. The results of the elections of governors also confirm the tendency that had deepened since 1989 of the popular preference of regional leadership, since 17 of the 23 elected governors repeated their mandates. Likewise, the Venezuelan electorate had apparently learned to evaluate the benefits of vote splitting, leaving the more party-loyal tradition.²¹ Speaking of strange alliances and contradictions, the industrial state of Anzoátegui show up an interesting example with the MAS party playing the main character. Nationally MAS participated in the Patriotic Pole behind Hugo Chávez. But, in Anzoátegui MAS openly allied with Causa R and launched Andrés Velásquez for the governance, thus acting against the strategy of Chávez and the Patriotic Pole who supported Alexis Rosas from PPT.²²

Presidential Elections of 1998

One week before the presidential elections of December 6, 1998, both AD and COPEI abandoned their presidential candidates in a desperate attempt to get a strong alliance against Chávez. In AD, the

governors of the party exhorted the abandonment of presidential candidate Luis Alfaro Ucero to instead support an alliance behind Salas Römer, the only candidate close to Chávez in public opinion surveys. AD probably committed one of its worst errors in selecting “lackluster” Alfaro Ucero as presidential candidate, and not a younger more popular leader, as Antonio Ledezma, mayor of the Caracas Libertador municipality. In the eight governorships that AD won in November of 1998 were all without allies. But, this situation covers various dimensions, and one must not simply suppose that the eight state victories of AD were due to the popularity of the party. Rather, I argue, it is important to underline the recognition of the regional leadership, also within AD. This was later confirmed when the governors and one AD faction succeeded in expelling Alfaro Ucero. Alfaro was probably the most powerful politician in Venezuela until then, considering his control and power within AD.²³ The multi-alliance behind Salas Römer eventually captured 39% of the total votes, far behind Chávez and the electoral alliance of Polo Patriótico (Patriotic Pole) that won with almost 57% of the votes. Evidently the alliances behind Chávez and Salas Römer together captured even more of the total votes than AD and COPEI did between 1973 and 1988, illustrating an immense and brutal fall of the previously so dominating parties. It is noteworthy that all of the bigger Venezuelan political parties have divided since 1997, illustrating the political party pluralization and fragmentation. Several of the divisions of AD have originated through conflicts between conservatives and reformists (here=decentralists) within the party.

Decentralization, Chavismo and New Constitution

After the presidential victory of Hugo Chávez in 1998, there was a series of referendums and popular elections through 1999 related to the rewriting of the Venezuelan Constitution. The popularity of Chávez was reflected in these popular consultations. In the elections of Deputies for the Constitutional Assembly, finally around 90% of the representatives were considered “*Chavista*”. At the same time, a majority of the deputies defended decentralization with some reservations, especially within the MVR party (Mascareño 2000:196).²⁴ Likewise, the Venezuelan people seemed to be content with the changes related to decentralization. To give an example, the political scientist, José Molina, shows in a recent study that the great majority of the Venezuelans are positive towards decentralization (Molina 2000:14). In the same context, Carrasquero & Welsch conclude in a recent study on public opinion and political culture, that even within the “*Chavismo*” movement a majority defend the existing

decentralization system (Carrasquero & Welsch 1999:43-44). It is also noteworthy that during the electoral campaigns of 1999 and 2000, practically all candidates (including Chávez) presented themselves as the defenders of the adequate continuation of decentralization.

Mega-Elections 2000

As a direct result of the popular referendums on the new constitution in 1999, elections of executive and legislative authorities were planned, including re-elections of those authorities that were elected in 1998.²⁵ The mega-elections would have been held on the May 28, but due to protests by the opposition politicians and civil society groups, and; the evident lack of capability to guarantee the transparency and functioning of the advanced electoral procedure, these were postponed to July 30. The strongest rival to Chávez for the presidency was his former soul- arms- and- jail brother, Fransisco Arias Cárdenas, launched by the Causa R party and a number of smaller parties (also by ex-*adecos* and ex-*copeyanos*). After a dirty electoral campaign Arias finished second with 38% of the vote casting, far behind Chávez who obtained 59%. An apparent change of campaign strategy characterized the Chávez movement before the mega-elections, and particularly the elections of governors and mayors. Already in January 1999, Hugo Chávez expressed that the time had come to also win the Venezuelan municipalities.

Although it has to be made clear that the discussions on which of the several aspirants representing the Patriotic Pole (PP) for mayor and governor all over Venezuela were intense and conflictive, resulting in divisions within the PP in most states and municipalities. During the electoral campaigns, PPT suffered from a most dramatic turmoil and under noisy circumstances the party withdrew from the Patriotic Pole behind Chávez. PPT did not present a presidential candidature of its own, but concentrated on the candidacies of governors, mayors and deputies to the National Assembly. Aristóbulo Istúriz, the second most influential of the PPT leaders beside Pablo Medina, expressed disillusionly: "We are not going to make campaign against Chávez (...) We only formalize what Chávez has already done: separated us." President Chávez immediately expressed that he did not need the support of the PPT, and he felt sure that a lot of the PPT grassroots militants would still vote for him in the presidential elections (Medina 2001:176-178). Providing a longer term view on the political and party changes on the regional state level, a lot has changed since 1995 (see Table 3).

The development of MAS is particularly interesting, since a first look at the figures could give the idea of MAS as the most stable political

party during the period. Furthermore, MAS has obtained around 10% in the presidential elections of the 1990's. But, this picture covers various dimensions and that says little concerning the realities that have occurred within and around the party. MAS maintains control of four governorships. Notwithstanding the alliance behind Chávez, the Patriotic Pole has divided during 2000, and PPT presented its own candidates for mayor, governor and deputies for the National Assembly.²⁶ The relationship between MVR and MAS has weakened since 1999, but the alliance continues in various states. Paradoxically, the attitudes of vengeance within the MVR grassroots took extreme dimensions, and practically everything that could remind of the old regime politics was condemned, which also contributed to clientelist behavior among the MVR members. As Steve Ellner describes, the argument of a definitive break-up with the political past evidently served to justify the pressure to "clean out" AD and COPEI militants from public administration, which opened political opportunities for MVR militants (Ellner 2001:15).

Table 3 – Elections of Governors in Venezuela 1995-2000 (Results of states captured by each political party)

Party	1995	1998	2000
AD	12	8	4
COPEI	3	5	1
Convergencia	1	1	1
Pr.Vzla-Carabobo	1	1	1
Nuevo Tiempo	-	-	1
Causa R	1	1	-
IRENE	-	1	-
PPT	-	3	1
MAS	4	3	4
MVR	-	1	10

In almost all municipalities, AD and COPEI lost a big share of their political representation. In Caracas, in 1995, AD held 15 of the 25 municipal counselor seats, but in December of 2000, the party only captured one of the 13 seats in the important Libertador municipality, compared to 12 (the rest) for MVR. In other parts of Caracas and the surrounding and penetrating state of Miranda, a new political party triumphed, *Primero Justicia* (Justice First) –PJ-, which nationally presents itself as the second political force on the municipal and parochial levels.²⁷ In the mega-elections of 2000, the PJ "only" obtained five

deputies for the National Assembly, and three mayoralties (but among them the prestigious Caracas municipality of Chacao).

Re-Centralization with the Chávez Government?

After becoming a popular political actor, Chávez has criticized political and administrative decentralization. He has questioned the excessive autonomy of state and municipal governments. The new constitution of 1999 was supposed to correct these defects and also some feudal heritages from the colonial tradition, and make central government intervention in municipal and state territories easier. As Ellner notes, the *Chavistas* failed in cleaning up the administration of public servants with linkages to traditional parties. And, the *Chavista* movement lacked the necessary party tightness with competent and disciplined cadres ready to fill the mid-level holes of the institutional bureaucracy, to thereby be able to guarantee a higher efficiency and the purge of irregularities. Furthermore, since the central government initiated checks of possible inefficiency and irregularities at state and municipal government levels, the *chavismo* became an easy target of decentralization obstructionist (Ellner 2001:19). In the 1990's, Guillermo O'Donnell (1994:59-60) introduced the concept 'delegative democracy', which rests on the premise that whoever wins a presidential election thereby is entitled to govern practically how he or she sees convenient. In delegative democracies, presidential candidates typically present themselves as standing above both organized interests and political parties (most valid for the Chávez case). At the same time, O'Donnell explains that the plebiscitary features of delegative democracy were observable in almost all Latin American countries before the current social and economic crisis, and that such kind of rule earlier has been described under the names of e.g. populism and *caudillismo*. The strengthening of the central executive of the government can be interpreted as a re-centralization of State power, and thus a continuation and deepening of the centralist tradition. In the Latin American delegative democracies, a common phenomenon in the decision-making and legislative processes has been that of *decretismo*; i.e., the president passes laws by decree (O'Donnell 1994:66-67). This system forms an obstacle for efficient decentralization and the possibilities of doing politics of local and regional political leaders. In a public speech in 1999, Chávez explained in a hard tone (as a message to the governors and mayors), that there was no flow of money to the regions since there had already been too much corruption and disorder (Mascareño 2000:193-194.). After two years of seemingly resignation and action paralysis within the opposition, the authoritative

style of president Chávez and the lack of concrete positive results have provoked frustration, most visible in 2001 and even more in 2002 (with several massive protest actions, manifestations, and at least one attempt of Coup d'État), both among the population and opposition politicians.

X. CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL REMARKS

The Venezuelan party-system has witnessed a transformation from a bipartisan to a multi-party system during the first decade of decentralized system, with a significant change in effective political competition between parties on several territorial levels. The direct elections of mayors and governors contributed to an undermining of the previous two-party hegemony, since the State was opened on municipal and state levels and facilitating the possible entry of political actors from other parties than AD and COPEI. Decentralization contributed to a break-up of party discipline, since the new decentralized political system practically signified that political leaders at the municipal and state levels now had more concrete double responsibilities (towards the party and the electorate). To understand the decline of AD-COPEI partyarchy and the collapse of the traditional Venezuelan political system, it is important to follow the gradual changes from the 1980's. The factionalism within AD would eventually contribute to further divisions of the party in the 1990's, and also showed to be decisive for the decision-making processes before the decentralization reforms. The final decision within AD to promote political decentralization was the result of political manipulations by Carlos Andrés Pérez, who used decentralization to get rid of rivalry and complications within AD. At the same time, decentralization was to be considered as a compromise with the opposition parties who claimed for political representation on the regional and local levels, not only MAS and Causa R, but also COPEI. During the first period of the decentralized system (1989-1995), Causa R in particular (and to some extent MAS) took advantage of the party base in the trade union movement on the regional and local levels to enter the political game and State arenas within the new decentralized rules.

Returning to Coppedge's ideas of Venezuelan democracy as a partyarchy, we can definitely see that a lot has happened since 1989. There are more channels for political 'bottom-up' pressure. Likewise, a change in political behavior and political culture is evident from the late 1980's onwards. The rapid emergence of Causa R, as well as the rise of the Chávez movement and MVR before the 1998 elections, were both processes in which the main political actors based their approach on an anti-politics discourse that attacked the traditional political system and

parties and thereby taking advantage of the general political discontentment and the opportunities within the decentralized political and electoral system. The popularity of Chávez and the anti-party and anti-establishment strategies can be considered as a kind of re-centralization of the political system. The situation can also be interpreted as a return to the Latin American populist tradition in sense of the leader-masses relationship. The traits of a delegative democracy, and its re-centralization implications as the result of the entrance of Chávez as top executive chief of Venezuela since 1999 have been apparent, as well as confusion around the destiny of the decentralization processes.

Notes

- 1 Both MAS and Causa R were formed as consequences of a split in 1971 of the Venezuelan Communist Party, PCV (*Partido Comunista de Venezuela*). Both have been categorized by a relatively strong union base, Causa R in the steel workers union in the Bolívar state and MAS e.g., in the textile industry in the state of Aragua. Both Causa R and MAS would eventually triumph in these two states in the first decentralized elections of governors in 1989.
- 2 Decentralization of government is not particularly unique for Venezuela. In Latin America, the processes of decentralization accelerated in the 1980's in various nations like Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Colombia, Peru and Guatemala. It is obvious that the introduction of decentralization coincides with the economic crisis of the decade, but the possible causal connection will not be thoroughly sorted out here.
- 3 The "partyarchy" concept has become generally accepted among researchers of Venezuelan and Latin American development (Coppedge 1994; Penfold-Becerra 1997; Diamond 1999:97; & Levine 2000).
- 4 See, for example, Philip (2000) and Coppedge (1994).
- 5 Sosa (2002:1-3). The author traces the political legitimacy to two fundamental elements: 1) the efficiency of the State in production and the maintenance of the conditions for access to a life of high quality for the whole population, and: 2) Democracy as a model to take collective decisions and to put them in practice from the government of the State.
- 6 Although, the elected AD governors would not agree, feeling ignored by the central leadership of the party. (Lalander 2002)
- 7 Ironically, before the presidential elections of 1998, Herrera Campíns was the most powerful COPEI leaders in the faction that promoted the back-up of Irene Sáez as the party's candidate, i.e., the option most related to the continuation of the decentralization process.
- 8 My conclusion and Crisp (2000: 45).
- 9 Interview, Albornóz (March 21, 2003) and confirmed through earlier interview with Benítez, Caracas (December 15, 1998).
- 10 Conversations with scholars and politicians in Venezuela, 1996-2003.

- 11 Various interviews in Venezuela, 1993-2003.
- 12 Interview with Molina, Maracaibo (May 22, 2000).
- 13 The Colombian political scientist has presented a framework on the development and strategies of popular movement, that is, when a political movement goes from the micro to the macro level and vice-versa (and from protest to proposal). Fals Borda (1992:304-306).
- 14 Interview with José Albornóz (now in PPT), Stockholm (March 21, 2003).
- 15 See, for example, Gómez Calcaño & Patruyo (1999).
- 16 The “*Por ahora*”-expression became a symbolic trademark for Hugo Chávez and the political movements around him. When he was arrested after the coup attempt on February 4, 1992, he managed to speak to the nation in Venezuelan television (he only confessed that “for the moment” the coup had failed). The social message of the Chávez movement appealed to large parts of the population. In the Senate ex-President Rafael Caldera defended the rebel officers (in an atmosphere of lynching feelings among many AD and COPEI leaders), something that in the 1993 elections would play in his favor.
- 17 For political opportunity structures and protest cycles, see Levine (2000) and Tarrow (1994).
- 18 Proyecto Venezuela (1998) & Kulisheck (1999).
- 19 The political party of Chávez, *Movimiento V República* -MVR- (*Fifth Republic Movement*) started as a civic-militar movement in the early 1980’s and it was not until July of 1997 that the movement officially registered as a political party in order to be able to compete in the 1998 elections.
- 20 These ideas are fundamental among social movement theorists, regarding the studies on the appearance of movements that challenge the State’s economic and political models. As a result of the struggle of some of the more insisting movements, the political space divides into new situations where a variety of social actors that establish their respective territory, in all leading to fragmentation of the political, societal, and including State arenas. See, for example, Escobar & Alvarez (1992:1-5).
- 21 Author’s conclusion and Interview with Fortunato González-Cruz, Mérida, (June 11, 1999). Electoral statistics will be provided in a forthcoming section on the 2000 mega-elections.
- 22 Author’s observations, November-December of 1998. Also: interview with: Benítez, Caracas, 1998.
- 23 Psychologically it was very hard for many grassroots adecos to give their votes to a candidate that for them represented COPEI. (Interviews with José Enrique Ruíz, La Guaira, (December 11, 1998).
- 24 A difference is noted regarding the position of the MVR constitutional assembly deputies regarding the political autonomy of the municipalities (85% support), whereas the autonomy of the governorships is questioned (only 29% support of the same MVR deputies).
- 25 Due to the separation of the regional elections from the presidential ones in 1998, Hugo Chávez and MVR considered these elections to be non-representative. The mega-elections were the biggest ever in Venezuela’s democratic history. The Caracas electorate also voted for the newly installed Super-Mayor of Metropolitan Caracas. The super-mayor substituted the authority of the Governor of the Federal District; i.e., the only governor that between 1989 and 1998 was directly nominated by the President.

- 26 Concerning the position of Chávez on decentralization, in May of 2000 he expressed that he would trade governors and mayors for deputies of the National Assembly, which raises the idea that Chávez considered the centralized power to be strategically more important in the political future of the nation.
- 27 <http://www.el-nacional.com/elN05122000/pd4s.htm>

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