

## **Hubert Gehring; Rebecca Zapf: Hugo Chávez Elected President again – Venezuela between Desire and Reality**

On December 3, 2006, Venezuela's populist president, Hugo Chávez Frías, did it again: Almost 63 percent of the country's population helped the leader of the 'Bolivarian Revolution', who has been in power since 1998, to win his greatest victory in a presidential election so far. 'Hasta la victoria siempre', Chávez called out to his supporters on the evening of the elections. 'Diehard' Chávez, whose reorganisation of Venezuela's political system was not marked by revolutionary over-eagerness but carried out slowly and systematically, astonished his opponents once again. At this point, it seems worthwhile to take a look into the past.

After the Pact of Punto Fijo was signed in 1958, Venezuela was for a long time considered the democratic showpiece of Latin America, enabled by high oil revenues to develop a functional political system together with a stable democracy. However, there were dark sides as well: Redistribution within the country only masked the grave social differences, and Venezuela's society became one of the most corrupt and inegalitarian throughout the world. After the oil crisis of 1973, during the first term of office of Carlos Andrés Pérez, oil revenues started to increase, and Venezuela soon developed into one of the richest countries in South America. After 1998, there were various attempts at a coup d'etat, one of them led by Hugo Chávez, caused not least by the worsening economic crisis. Rafael Caldera, who was elected president in 1994, succeeded in stabilising the country politically, but the economic crisis remained.

When in 1998, the newly elected president, Mr Chávez, vowed to impose a revolutionary model on the country, Venezuela stepped into the limelight of worldwide interest. As a matter of fact, Mr Chávez swiftly began to set up the 'Fifth Republic' and to implement a new constitution which, regarded as both the gravestone of *puntofijismo* and the mother of the Bolivarian Revolution, he apparently intends to export to all Latin American countries. Mr Chávez further expanded his power in the mega-elections of 2000, the first to be held after the new constitution was announced. Although the putsch attempted by parts of the opposition in 2002 failed and led to strikes and protests, it strengthened the position of Mr Chávez and his party, the MVR, as shown not only by the referendum of 2004 but also by the parliamentary elections of 2005, which virtually reduced Congress to a one-party parliament.

The social programmes initiated by Mr Chávez, the so-called *misiones*, certainly attracted attention especially among the country's poor. Their objective is to fight weak points in the 'Fifth Republic', such as nepotism, clientelism, poverty, and insufficient participation of the people. Up to now, millions of Venezuelans have participated in the more than 20 *misiones* that were introduced in 2003. However, they are not uncontroversial. According to international studies, their basis is brittle. They did not contribute to alleviating poverty in any way, and corruption spread even wider. The subsidisation of supermarkets, called 'Mision Mercal', proved a flop; contrary to the assertions of the state, illiteracy is not abating, and the gross domestic product per capita has decreased despite growing oil revenues.

Throughout the last few years, Mr Chávez succeeded in expanding his power and accumulating it in the executive branch. What has become characteristic of his rule is that *chavismo* runs through all political and societal levels, its representatives occupying almost all important posts. There are hardly any institutions that the president has not yet 'brought into line'. Amnesty International especially bemoans the deep inroads into the judiciary system. On this as well as on the other side of Venezuela's borders, the 'new socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century' is being propagated, although critical voices are becoming louder and louder, asking what is actually new about this 'new socialism'.

Not only in domestic but also in foreign policy, the president likes to show himself as the heir of the freedom fighter, Simon Bolivar, and therefore the legitimate speaker for the entire third world. In fact, many Latin Americans view Mr Chávez as an undogmatic moderniser of left-wing democratic thought, which is blooming once again on the subcontinent. Mr Chávez feels strengthened by the fact that his country has by now become a member of MERCOSUR, the fourth-biggest economic zone of the world with quite a considerable trade volume.

Backed from the start by voters living in the poor and rural regions of the country, Mr Chávez entered the parliamentary elections of December 3, 2006, as the odds-on favourite of the Movimiento Quinta República (MVR) which was founded in 1997. Political parties that are ideologically close to the MVR are the Patria para Todos (PPT), the Movimiento por la Democracia Social (PODEMOS), and the Partido Comunista Venezolano (PCV). In a society divided into two camps by an almost insuperable ideological rift, the country's 44 opposition parties include not only the two traditional parties, the Acción Democrática (AD) and the Comité de Organización Política Electoral (COPEI) which both lost much trust among the people, but also the newly established Primero Justicia (PJ) and Un Nuevo Tiempo.

In his election campaign, Mr Chávez showed that he knew exactly how to address the people's emotions and fears. He said he had done everything 'for love', had become president 'for love', and needed 'your vote for love'. However, the president spoke not only about love but also about fear, especially about the people's fear of losing their job. In Venezuela where, in 2004, innumerable people did lose their job after signing a paper to support impeachment proceedings against Mr Chávez, there is certainly reason for that.

Manuel Rosales, an opposition candidate, also made the fears of the people the subject of his campaign. His response to Mr Chávez's social programmes was the *tarjeta negra*, a black debit card to be given to the poor to ensure that they received government subsidies from oil revenues. However, Mr Chávez's challenger deliberately avoided to demonise the things the president had initiated, knowing that the populist policy of the head of government was widely accepted. With this strategy, Rosales was quite successful: On the weekend prior to the elections, he succeeded in mobilising 1.4 million people to join in a *marcha* – a number which Mr Chávez and his supporters could not top the next day.

However, Mr Rosales did not win the elections which, according to foreign observers, conformed to international standards only to limited extent. On the evening of December 3, the president had racked up 62.87 percent of the votes; his challenger, on the other hand, had only 36.88 percent. As soon as Mr Chávez had celebrated his victory on all television channels and announced the implementation of the 'socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century', Mr Rosales acknowledged his defeat and asked his supporters to stay calm.

But why was Chávez re-elected? Was it for the love he demanded and was shown by most of the country's voters? Or was it the 'Stockholm syndrome', i.e. the victims' psychological dependence on their tormentor, which urged the majority of Venezuelans to vote for Mr Chávez? To be sure, the opposition is in a disastrous situation. And to many, especially the poor Venezuelans, a pluralist party system certainly counts for less than a charismatic leader. Mr Chávez successfully focussed on the social question and made himself popular with his *misiones*. The gap between the theory of the programmes on the one hand and their implementation on the other troubles only a few. On the contrary – the person of Hugo Chávez is increasingly idealised, and his function as a bringer of salvation is what many people wish for.

On the evening of the election, the president spoke of his intention to deepen, improve, and further expand the revolution. The planned amendment to the constitution serves exactly this purpose: It provides for enhancing the force of the people and promoting the 'socialist' process together with related expropriations 'for the good of the nation'. The 'Ley Antimonopolio, Antioligopolio y contra la Competencia Desleal' is to be amended to suit the Bolivarian government. Moreover, it is planned to reorganise the police, to intervene in the school system, to redefine international cooperation, and to make changes within the party system. What particularly alerts the opposition parties is the last step which makes them fear for their existence – a fear that has good reason as there is talk about a 'partido unico'.

To Mr Chávez, 2006 was a year of travel – especially to those countries which Europe, for one, rates as critical. The Venezuelan endeavours to obtain a leading role in South America, where numerous unsolved problems offer him an ideal ground for spreading his message. Mr Chávez feels especially close to Cuba which, in the post-Castro era, will need a new 'lider' for the revolution and the opposition against the USA. At the summit of the Latin American states which took place late in 2006 in Bolivia, Mr Chávez stated that in his opinion, both the Andean Community of Nations and MERCOSUR were useless. Both associations should give way to ALBA, Mr Chávez's vision of a South American free-trade zone.

The question now is: What will become of the opposition in the country? To regain its strength, the opposition needs to acknowledge its defeat of December 3. Here, Mr Rosales has already taken the right step, acknowledging Mr Chávez as the winner. What the opposition needs to do now is to seek a dialogue with the government. Despite its defeat, it does not have to go into hiding: Consisting of 44 small political parties, it nevertheless succeeded in finding a single candidate who, in turn, managed to mobilise hundreds of thousands of people. In Venezuela, people already speak of a *concertación* on the Chilean pattern, of a common opposition list against *chavismo*. It certainly remains to be seen whether such a list will succeed in alleviating the polarisation of Venezuela's society forced by Mr Chávez. At all events, a hopeful beginning has been made.