The failure of the military coup in April 2002 (more than 80 per cent of the generals in operational positions remained faithful to Chávez and the constitution) constituted the first great defeat of the opposition and a real gift to Chávez. The new situation allowed for various actors to be unmasked and for the people to acquire a much higher level of political understanding – within both military and civilian cadres it was now known who could be counted on and who could not. It created favourable conditions in which to move forward with cleaning out the military. It divided the opposition. It reminded an ever-increasing number of the middle classes, who were previously against the process, of the anarchy which would result from the marginalization of Chávez.

The frustrated attempt to bring the country to a halt on December 2, 2002, was the second great defeat of the opposition. They could not bring the country to a halt. Chávez did not bow to their pressure. But most importantly, the oil industry came to be truly under the control of the Venezuelan state. This was the second great gift from the opposition. Due to their subversive and saboteur attitude, around 18,000 upper and middle-level managers who opposed the government – and who actually exercised control of the company – created the conditions in which they could be legally dismissed.

The ratification of President Chávez’s mandate in the recall referendum of August 15, 2004 – a process without precedent in world history – was the third great defeat that the Venezuelan opposition suffered in attempting to terminate the government of President Chávez. The triumph, by a huge margin, and under the attentive gaze of hundreds of international observers, who unanimously ratified the results, was the third gift from the opposition. It constituted, as one of the observers, the well-known Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano, put it, ‘an injection of optimism in this world where democracy has lost so much prestige’ due to the fact that it has been unable to resolve the problem of poverty.
It was not the victory of a single man, but rather of a humanist and solidarity-based project for the country, as much in the international as in the national arena; of a project for the country which had emerged as an alternative to the voracious and predatory neoliberal model – a model of endogenous development and social economy. It was a triumph of the current Venezuelan constitution, the only constitution in the world that contemplates the idea of a recall referendum for the presidency. But, above all else, it was a victory of the people, of popular organization, of the people from the barrios, but also of the people from the middle class, who responded to the call of the president to organize themselves in their local voting areas, taking the initiative without waiting to be constituted by the organizations that were heading the electoral campaign.

THE NEW POST-REFERENDUM STAGE

With this triumph, a new stage in the Bolivarian revolutionary process began. The media warmongers were left without ammunition. The opposition revealed itself; it lost a lot of credibility. Internal struggles between different factions intensified. But while the opposition had been defeated in this battle, it was clear that the forces supporting Chávez had not yet won the war. We must not forget that in a country of 26 million inhabitants, close to 4 million people voted in favour of revoking his mandate. Nor must we forget the expectations that were created by this triumph amongst the 6 million people who voted NO. The challenges to be met in this new stage were extremely varied: political, economic, institutional and communicational.

First, the Bolivarian revolutionary process had to make a qualitative leap forward in regard to the protagonistic participation of the people. President Chávez’s most important idea – ‘poverty cannot be eliminated if power is not given to the people’ – needed to materialize in organizational forms and concrete participation. And that is what occurred. The concept of the communal councils emerged. On a rough estimate, Venezuela had around 52 thousand communities, and in each of these communities an entity needed to be elected which would play the role of a communitarian government. This entity was called the communal council, and a majority of them have already received government resources to begin carrying out small projects that the community has prioritized.

It was also crucial, secondly, to make headway with the development of a new productive model, as an alternative to capitalism. And that is what is occurring. Venezuela is being transformed from a country which survived on oil revenues and the export of primary materials, into a country with a solid agricultural and industrial base, which produces goods and services that
are needed for popular consumption: a model based on new social relations of production that liberate wage labour from exploitation by capital, by promoting social production enterprises inspired by principles of solidarity, cooperation, complementarity, reciprocity, and economic and financial sustainability. A model that aspires to territorial balance, and harmonious and proportionate development of the regions, in order to overcome the housing problem and the degeneration of the five large cities in which 75 per cent of the population is concentrated. A model based on a new generation of basic goods companies oriented towards deepening endogenous development. I am referring to the creation of Compañía Nacional de Industrias Básicas (Coniba, National Company of Basic Industries) and its eleven affiliates, and the Corporación Petroquímica de Venezuela (Pequiven, Venezuelan Petrochemical Corporation), which aim to strengthen innovative technological capacities in order to transform primary materials into value-added products which will allow for import substitution and the diversification of exports. A model that promotes state investment in strategic industries like telecommunications (CVG Telecom) and those that have to do with food security and food sovereignty, such as Corporación Venezolana Agraria (CVA, Venezuelan Agrarian Corporation), the parent company of new enterprises in the agricultural sector. Meanwhile, a process of co-management has made notable advances in the electricity industry in the state of Merida, and in the aluminum company, ALCASA, in the state of Bolívar. And the number of factories closed by their owners and taken over by the workers has increased.

At the same time, one of the priority tasks is the need to solve the problem of employment. With this objective in mind, the state has being pushing forward with the reactivation of the private industrial sector which is willing to collaborate with the project of endogenous development and social economy proposed by the government. The framework of an agreement with this sector has been established, through which the government provides low-interest loans, as long as companies take on board their social responsibility, committing themselves to dedicating at least 10 per cent of their earnings to meeting the most pressing demands of the nearby communities.

Following the referendum there was a notable improvement in the correlation of forces in the institutional sphere. The results of the elections for governors and mayors were very positive for the government. The opposition now only governs two out of twenty-four states. All the deputies in the National Assembly are Bolivarian. The opposition candidates, seeing that they were going to lose, opted to not participate in the elections, hoping to discredit this legislative entity in doing so.
WEAKNESSES IN THE PROCESS

This quantitative accumulation of forces should have translated into a qualitative accumulation. An emphasis should have been placed on efficiency, on better performance in relation to the responsibilities that each person must assume in order to put into practice all the projects and initiatives announced by the government; but this is far from having been achieved. The old state model continues in force and, despite attempts by Chávez to change things, is very strong. The same is true of the issue of corruption.

Prior to the December 3, 2006 presidential elections little or no advance had been made in the formation of a political instrument better adapted to meeting the great challenges that the Bolivarian revolutionary process has set for itself. Disputes continued – and perhaps became even more acute – over positions at the different levels of leadership of the process. The Miranda Electoral Command, formed to lead the presidential electoral process, was hegemonized by the Movimiento V República (MVR, Movement for a Fifth Republic), provoking discontent among the other political parties that support the revolutionary process, as well as among the population. If anything, rather than advancing in the construction of a united instrument of the workers, the process took steps backward. Today, there continues to be too much dispersion. Old methods continue to be employed.

The opposition media outlets, which make up the great majority, exponentially magnify the errors and weaknesses of the government, and distort its project, re-creating a climate of opposition and influencing a significant number of Venezuelans. Of course the United States government – for whom Chávez has become a real obsession – has continuously been behind these campaigns.

Lastly, added to this daily and hourly media bombardment, was an opposition that finally began to unite around the figure of Manuel Rosales as the opposition presidential candidate for the December 2006 elections. Rosales, who had up till then been the governor of Zulia – one of the largest and most strategic states in the country, due to the fact that it shares a border with Colombia – carried out a well-orchestrated electoral campaign, promising to conserve all the good things that the Chávez government had done for the people, and demagogically announcing that he would also directly deposit into the bank account of every poor Venezuelan household a significant sum of money out of the oil revenues, so that instead of taking money out of the country to help other people, he would be handing it over to the people of Venezuela.

Becoming aware of all these limitations and obstacles, only weeks from
polling day, the president began to personally assume the direction of the campaign, appearing everywhere in a tireless tour throughout the whole country, where the people of the barrios applauded him wildly. In the final two weeks of the campaign he began to involve the youth as the central motor of his campaign, and to point to this social sector as the moral force which would allow the process to overcome the vices that infected previous generations.

Although no one doubted that Chávez would win, given the notable gains that the Venezuelan people have obtained thanks to the Bolivarian government, for all the reasons just cited it seemed unlikely that the Bolivarian leader could secure a better electoral result than that achieved in the referendum. This appraisal of the situation was confirmed by a majority of the opinion polls, which made him the winner by a margin of some 20 per cent, the same 20 per cent as he had had more than two years earlier. Yet a clean election, with the lowest abstention rate in the political history of the country (less than 25 per cent), carried out under the attentive gaze of hundreds of international observers, ratified the mandate of the Venezuelan president by an overwhelming majority of votes. Hugo Chávez got 7 million votes, 1 million more than in the 2004 referendum, with the opposition, represented by Rosales, maintaining its 4 million votes. It was such a convincing victory that the US government had no other option but to recognize the triumph, publicly accepting that a democratic regime exists in Venezuela, and expressing its interest in establishing a positive and constructive relationship with the new government.²

This was Chávez’s fourth great triumph, although this time it cannot be said that it was the fourth great defeat of the opposition because, although they lost, they came out strengthened from the battle. We need to accept that its most recognizable leaders demonstrated maturity in acknowledging their defeat with nobility, and stating their disposition to wage future battles within the rules of the game laid out by the Bolivarian constitution. For his part, President Chávez responded positively to these declarations, stating his disposition for dialogue, but ‘without conditions or blackmail’, and always so long as the opposition did not expect him to abandon his principles. ‘Socialism of the 21st century is, and will continue to be, the objective we are aiming for’, he affirmed.

THE CREATION OF A NEW PARTY OF THE REVOLUTION

In one of his first speeches after the election Chávez put forward ‘as a strategic fundamental line, the deepening, widening and expansion of the Bolivarian Revolution… on the Venezuelan road to socialism’, and made three
fundamental announcements which reflect his clear awareness of the weaknesses that plague the political process in his country: the struggle against corruption and bureaucracy as two new strategic objectives of his government for the next period, and a call to construct the united party of the revolution.³

The first two announcements were not surprising, given that the president had repeatedly stated his preoccupation with these issues over the previous months, but the third announcement regarding his decision to create a new political party – which he provisionally called the United Socialist Party of Venezuela – was surprising. Not because he had not referred to the issue before, or had not discussed it with the leaders of all the political parties that supported him, but rather because the news was not preceded by a profound debate on the issue and because everyone was led to believe that what they would be dealing with, at least initially, would be more akin to the construction of a multiparty ‘front’, not a new political instrument that would imply the rapid dissolution of the existing parties, some with a long trajectory, such as the Communist Party.

But Chávez was very explicit: he rejected the idea of what he called ‘a sum of acronyms’, at the same time as he put forward the necessity to construct a new party with new figures elected from the grassroots. What we are dealing with, he said, is a political entity that would unite at its core all those Venezuelans willing to fight to construct socialism [in Venezuela]: whether they be militants from the political groups of the left, or members of the social movements, or those compatriots who up until this moment were either not members or, disappointed by the deviations and errors committed, had stopped being members, of some of the existing organizations.⁴

As part of this new political project tens of thousands of activists (Chávez called them ‘promoters’) travelled the country preparing a massive enrolment of all those who aspired to become members of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela, the largest in the history of the country. Up to June 3, one week before registration closed, more than 5 million people had enrolled. Unfortunately, everything seems to suggest that in order to obtain such a high figure, acts of ‘stacking’ or pressure were used on more than a few occasions, blurring the results obtained and causing discomfort amongst many people. The president has called on everyone to denounce this kind of behaviour, stating that it is necessary to ‘take care of the process…. and denounce in time any deviation’ which could cause a lot of damage in the future.

On the other hand during his ‘Aló Presidente’ television broadcast on Sunday, June 10, Chávez made it very clear that enrolment is one thing,
while the later selection process of those who will go on to shape the new political instrument is another. His hope is that the leadership of the new party will be made up of tested militants, even if it will only be made up of a handful of people. What has not been discussed until now is who will carry out this selection, or how. At the moment, a review of all the enrolments is being conducted by the National Electoral Council (CNE). Afterwards, the registered members will meet in groups of 200 – the so-called ‘socialist battalions’ – to allow real, democratic participation by everyone, and to facilitate the selection from below of the best men and women from these battalions as voceros (spokespeople) at the Founding Congress. When it was previously calculated that some 4 million people would be enrolled as members it was estimated that around 22,000 socialist battalions would have to be constituted and that each battalion would elect a vocero to the regional assembly, which in turn would send voceros to the Congress. The Congress would therefore be made up of around 2,200 congress delegates. Today, given that inscriptions have risen to over 5 million, new calculations will have to be made. What this formula does not resolve is what will happen if several recognized leaders happen to be in the same community.

The Founding Congress is expected to last three months, debating all the issues related to the new party: its program, organizational forms, the type of membership and other issues, beginning with a debate over what type of country are they trying to build. After each session, these national voceros will go back to their respective grassroots assemblies to keep them informed and to deepen the debate at this level. It will be from these grassroots assemblies that those aspiring to fill positions at the different levels of leadership in the party will have to be nominated. No one who does not have support in their local base can be nominated to a position within this new political dispensation. It is expected that through this mechanism there will be a flowering of thousands of new faces, until now unknown, originating from the new leaderships emerging out of community work, workplaces and study centres.

THE FIVE MOTORS

On January 10, 2007, after being sworn in for his second presidential term, Chávez made another significant announcement: he proposed that the advance towards socialism of the 21st century should depend on ‘five constituent motors’. The first would be the Enabling Law, which allows the executive to legislate on areas where this is necessary in order to speed up the transition to socialism. The second relates to the reform of the Bolivarian Constitution of Venezuela, which would allow, amongst other things, the modification of articles that in the economic and political sphere are not
in accordance with the project of the socialist society whose construction is being attempted. There is nothing strange about the fact that the Bolivarian Constitution of 1999 has become too small for the revolutionary process, just as a child’s clothes become too small as they grow up.

The third ‘motor’ envisages a campaign of moral, economic, political and social education called ‘Morality and Enlightenment’, which has to be as much present in territorial-based organizations (communal councils and other organizations) as in the workplace. The fourth, which the president called ‘Geometry of Power’, aims at revising the political-territorial arrangements of the country, generating the construction of city systems and federal territories with the objective of redistributing political, economic, social and military power more equitably across the national arena. The fifth, and most important, refers to ‘The Revolutionary Explosion of Communal Power’ and aims to promote communal councils and everything that has to do with popular power. According to the Venezuelan head of state, these five motors will be what drive the ‘Bolivarian socialist project’.

ADVANCES IN NATIONALIZATION

In the last few months more progress has been made in the nationalization of companies than in the previous nine years of government, a dramatic move forward in the recovery of the country’s economic sovereignty. ‘Electricidad de Caracas’, the largest company in the power sector, valued at $900 million, was nationalized. The US multinational AES signed an agreement with the Venezuelan government, handing over 82.14 per cent of its shares.\(^5\)

On May 1, 2007, the Venezuelan government also recovered its energy sovereignty by proceeding to nationalize the oil in the Orinoco Oil Belt, where the most important reserves in the world are located. There was a reduction of the power of the oil consortiums that operate in this region of the Orinoco river, where close to 400,000 barrels of oil are extracted daily, a figure which could rise to 600,000 barrels. This measure will affect various foreign companies. Those most affected will be the US companies Chevron, Exxon Mobil, Texaco and ConocoPhilips; the French company Total; the Norwegian Statoil; and the UK-based British Petroleum. For the Venezuelan company PDVSA, until now a minority partner in this consortium, the situation has been reversed: its share will now be 60 per cent.\(^6\)

On June 8, 2007, Compañía Anónima Nacional Teléfonos de Venezuela (CANTV, the National Anonymous Telephone Company of Venezuela), the biggest private telephone company in the country, which had been publicly owned up until 1991, was renationalized. At the time of renationalization CANTV controlled 83 per cent of the internet market, 70 per
cent of the national telephone communications market and 42 per cent of international calls. It owned close to 3 million telephone lines and 100,000 public telephones. With this measure the Venezuelan state has advanced in the control of the strategic telecommunications sector. The renationalized company is attempting to extend telephone access to all areas of the country. In two years there will be a tripling of areas with fibre optic coverage. Its services will reach the most remote rural areas. As well as expanding the service, the aim is to make it accessible to the lowest income sectors, lowering the cost of calls.

**VENEZUELAN YOUTH AND THE BATTLE OVER RCTV**

During the night of May 27, the broadcasting concession granted to Radio Caracas Television, the most powerful opposition television station in the country, expired. I agree with the Venezuelan political analyst, Vladimir Acosta, that this was the second great revolutionary moment of the process after the recovery of control over oil in 2003. To convert a private channel into a public service channel is not only a strong blow to the media hegemony of the Venezuelan opposition, it is also an act ‘that goes to the heart of global power’, because today this fundamentally depends on the mass media. Without a media monopoly to fabricate a consensus, the supremacy of this global power is enormously weakened. This is why there has been such a virulent conservative reaction at the global level.

The measure was announced by Chávez months in advance. The opposition immediately prepared its response. It tried to make citizens believe that, with this act, freedom of expression would be mortally wounded, and that the government was advancing in an accelerated manner towards a dictatorial regime. After attempting various mobilizations of the adult sector, none of which achieved the scale hoped for, a new political subject appeared on the streets of Caracas: the students. Thousands of them, the majority coming from the private universities, came out onto the streets protesting against what they called the ‘closure’ of Radio Caracas Television. Although their intentions were peaceful, a group of them provoked disturbances, lighting bonfires in the streets, blocking traffic and forcing police forces to intervene to maintain order. Images of confrontations between students and police travelled the globe, as more proof of the authoritarian character of the government. What was not reported was the fact that most of those injured belonged to the police, who had assumed a dignified attitude, not allowing themselves to be provoked.

But what do these students represent? Are we dealing with a mere apolitical movement, as they themselves and the opposition media want people to
believe? The strategy of the opposition has been, on one hand, to ‘present the students as a unified mass’, and on the other, to maintain their separation from the student movement, in order to underscore its independent and spontaneous character. The first element of this strategy was rapidly pulled apart by an important sector of the students who supported the measure adopted by the government. They came out on the streets on a mass scale. In regards to the second element, new evidence is emerging daily which reveals the behind-the-scenes intervention of the opposition. There are not only recorded telephone conversations and intercepted electronic messages which reveal their plans to use the students for political purposes, but there is also in addition irrefutable proof provided by one of the students’ own leaders.

The small group of student leaders who protested the ‘closure’ of RCTV, convinced by media propaganda that the chavistas are against freedom of expression in Venezuela, decided to demand an audience with the National Assembly, believing that this initiative would be rejected. To their surprise, the opposite occurred: Cilia Flores, the president of the Parliament, broadened the proposal, deciding that the event would be used to open up a debate between students from the opposition and those supporting the government’s measure. In an unprecedented gesture the National Assembly opened its doors to the students so that they could come and debate. It was decided that each current would be granted ten minutes to speak. The opposition students entered wearing red shirts, which was strange given that red is the color which has identified chavistas. Afterwards it was discovered why: ‘far more than a safety strategy, they were an integral part of a professionally-designed media strategy’. The platform was given first to Douglas Barrios, a student at the Universidad Metropolitana, a university known for admitting only the elite of society. After a speech lacking in any substance, in which he called for a process of national reconciliation, he ended by saying that he ‘dreams of a country where people are taken into consideration without having to wear a uniform’, and having finished this phrase, he and the groups of opposition students removed their red shirts, allowing everyone to see the white shirts they had on underneath, covered with various slogans defending RCTV.

All this could have been interpreted to be an original, theatrical act of protest, if it had not been for the fact that the last sheet of his speech was left behind on the podium. On it, very precise instructions were given as to how they should conduct themselves in the National Assembly. The text was signed by ARS Publicity, a company owned by the Globovision group, which was implicated in the April 2002 coup. Taking off their red shirts, only speaking once, and then leaving immediately – all these were actions
outlined in the instructions. This last action was halted, at least for the duration of the following speaker, due to the pressure exerted on them to stay by the chavista students and the deputies of the National Assembly. The self-proclaimed defenders of democracy were not capable of democratically debating; they made only one intervention and then retired from the scene. The self-proclaimed independents were actually pawns of Globovision. We should not assume, however, that all the students that marched against the decision not to renew the concession are as hypocritical as the student opposition leaders. It is quite likely most of them are open to healthy debate and to reconsidering their position on the Bolivarian project for society under President Chávez’s leadership.

The events in Parliament not only put into relief the strategy of the opposition, but also, more importantly, revealed the remarkable student leadership that has been emerging in the country. One after the other, the ten student speakers supporting the measure adopted by the government began to dismantle, one by one, the arguments of the opposition, with freshness, intelligence, creativity and, above all, forcefulness. Who can argue, for example, with what the next speaker, Andreína Tarazón, from the Universidad Central de Venezuela, said, when she criticized the behaviour of the opposition students, comparing their conduct in not facing up to the debate, with that of Condoleezza Rice during the meeting of the OAS, where she spoke and then left?

Those watching television, who saw this live via a national broadcast on all frequencies, must have felt a strong impact thanks to the quality of the interventions. They were so good that it was not long before they began to be distributed via the internet. Thousands of people in all parts of the world were able to be impressed by the words of Andreína and her comrades. She became one of Venezuela’s best ambassadors. But the blow dealt to the media by the left could not go unpunished. A few days later YouTube suspended the account of the user named ‘Lbracci’, through which this experience had been distributed in video format.12

On the other hand, new spaces for debate are opening up in all corners of the country. And the youth sectors are proving in practice that democracy exists in Venezuela. Once again, an attack by the opposition has had a very positive outcome for the Bolivarian process: a new social actor, full of force, of ideals, has entered the political sphere. There is no doubt that the students who support the government have everything to win: a project for a more humanistic and solidarity-based country, that puts its efforts into eliminating inequalities; that calls for the exercise of greater social control over all activities in order to struggle against the scourge of corruption; that restores
the sovereignty of the homeland. It is a project that the Venezuelan youth cannot afford to be indifferent towards.

NOTES

This essay, forthcoming in Spanish in the 2007 Abiven Yearbook, was translated by Federico Fuentes for http://www.venezuelanalysis.com.

1 Among the most important groups present were: the European Union, the Carter Center, and the Organization of American States (OAS). Chávez obtained the support of around 6 million people; around 4 million voted in favour of revoking his mandate.

2 The United States expressed via Sean McCormack, spokesperson for the State Department, its desire to have a ‘positive’ and ‘constructive’ relationship with the Bolivarian government. ‘We congratulate the Venezuelan people for its conduct during this election’, he declared, also expressing his desire to ‘work with the government of President Chávez’. This seems to be a radical change given that not long ago, Washington classified Chávez as a ‘destabilizing force for the region’.


8 Vladimir Acosta, ‘La no renovación de RCTV es un hecho revolucionario porque toca al corazón del poder mundial’, Interview by Marcelo Colussi, Argenpress, June 2007.


11 Ibid.