

Chávez puts religion into his revolution

Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, who once said he wasn't 'Christian or Catholic,' now calls `the Kingdom of Christ . . . the kingdom of socialism.'

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CARACAS - It was during a driving rain on Sunday night when newly reelected Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez took to the presidential palace balcony in central Caracas and mentioned his latest guiding figure: Jesus Christ.

"The Kingdom of Christ is the kingdom of love, of peace; the kingdom of justice, of solidarity, brotherhood, the kingdom of socialism," he told the raucous crowd celebrating below. ``This is the kingdom of the future of Venezuela."

Hardly words of a hard-core leftist, Chávez's pronouncements were part of the increasingly religious flavor that he has given his "21st Century Socialism." These days, the president evokes Christ almost as much as he talks about his other hero, Simón Bolívar, who led a long stretch of the Andes to independence from Spain in the 19th Century.

It's far from clear what Chávez's newfound religion will mean for Venezuela, its neighbors and the U.S. government in his next six-year term.

He still refers to President Bush as the "devil" and on Tuesday, after the top U.S. diplomat here expressed a willingness to seek better relations with Chávez, the president said he does not believe the U.S. government is sincere.

"I'm ready to talk," Chávez said. ``But if you're going to talk to the devil, you have to have strong morals because the devil has many ways to tempt you."

'DEEPEN' THE MOVEMENT

'During his already nearly eight years in power, Chávez has created a massive social welfare state using the country's increasing oil revenue as a buffer. And after winning on Sunday, Chávez promised to "deepen" his revolution.

For Chávez, this means the continued expansion and consolidation of health and education projects that he has begun. He said on Tuesday that his government will build more health clinics and hospitals.

He added that he also will create new universities and grade schools to follow his "Bolivarian" model. He currently has a commission working on a new national education curriculum, which includes turning the students away from "individualism" and more toward "collectivism."

Chávez says he will also seek more "economic equilibrium," which he has hinted could mean more state control over the country's natural resources such as oil and minerals, as well as an increasing number of state appropriations of private property deemed "idle."

The president also has threatened to nationalize the country's largest telecommunications company and squeeze the television industry by revoking private licenses. In addition, legislation awaits that could further muzzle newspapers, already facing laws that prohibit criticism of the government or its officials.

OTHER COUNTRIES

"Deepening" the revolution for Chávez is also an international project. He has given special emphasis in recent days on Venezuela's relationship with Argentina and Brazil. The three countries, he said, form the axis of a new economic, political and military bloc: He said they could start joint military exercises in the near future.

At the same time, Chávez has promised to continue his estimated \$2 billion yearly subsidy for Cuba, which has become the geographical home for Chávez's effort to forge a regional economic and political alliance with like-minded Latin American governments such as those in Bolivia, and soon in Ecuador and Nicaragua, which recently elected leftist presidents.

At the very least, it appears that Chávez's plan would include him as president for the foreseeable future. Chávez's second and last term is up in 2012, but the president says he will eliminate term limits.

This last proposal has worried some who say that Chávez may be beginning to think of himself in messianic terms, something the president denies.

"I don't think I'm Jesus Christ, far from it," he said Tuesday just after he proclaimed: "Our socialism should be Christian . . . Socialism is love."

Ironically, the only leader in the region who may mention God more than Chávez could be President Bush, whose administration has branded Chávez as a destabilizing factor in the region.

COMPLICATED

Chávez's relationship with God is as vague and complicated as his "Bolivarian Revolution."

His family is Catholic, but he is not known as a particularly religious man. He doesn't attend church regularly and has publicly chided the Catholic hierarchy in this country for what he says is its support of the traditional oligarchy.

Indeed, Agustín Blanco Muñoz, who has published several books about Chávez, says that the former army lieutenant colonel who led a failed coup in 1992 before being elected president in 1998, told him once that he wasn't "Christian or Catholic."

"He's religious in the way that it serves his political project," Muñoz told The Miami Herald.

The majority of Venezuelans are Catholic, although many also mix African deities and some historical figures into their beliefs. Some analysts say Chávez embodies this part of Venezuelans' religiosity.

"What he practices is what Venezuelans practice, which is the syncretism of the different religious practices and symbols," said Alberto Garrido, who also has written several books on Chávez.