

## Chavez Would Abolish Presidential Term Limit

'We Are Going to Deepen This Revolution,' Venezuelans Told at Swearing-In Ceremony

The Washington Post  
January 11, 2007

BOGOTA, Colombia, Jan. 10 -- Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, sworn in to another six-year term on Wednesday, said he would seek a constitutional amendment that could extend his tenure as he hastens his country's transformation into what he calls "21st-century socialism."

In a three-hour discourse in the National Assembly that received widespread news coverage across Latin America, Chavez promised that "we are going to radicalize this process of ours, we are going to deepen this revolution."

Invoking the mantra once issued by his mentor and ally, Fidel Castro of [Cuba](#), Chavez said the choice for [Venezuela](#) was clear: "Fatherland, socialism or death." The ceremony was full of symbolism. Chavez wore the tricolored presidential sash on his left side, switching it from his right, a nod to his leftist leanings. And he frequently alluded to Simón Bolívar, the 19th-century independence hero he reveres, God and Jesus Christ, whom Chavez called "the greatest socialist of the people."

"I will not rest," Chavez said, his right hand raised. "I would give my life for the construction of Venezuelan socialism, for the construction of a new political, social and economic system."

The swearing-in came during an enthralling day for leftists in Latin America, where Chavez has been among several populist leaders to win election in recent years. In Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega, the former guerrilla who formed an alliance with Cuba during the 1980s, returned to the presidency in a ceremony just hours after Chavez was sworn in.

All week in Caracas, Chavez has shaken markets and angered the Bush administration by promising to nationalize utilities, seek broader constitutional powers and increase the state's control of the economy. He has also frequently referred to the new, more radical phase in what he calls his revolution -- drawing comparisons with Castro's famous declaration on Dec. 2, 1961: "I am a Marxist-Leninist and will be one until the day I die."

If the theatrics are similar, however, the apparent goal is not. Chavez stresses that Venezuela will remain a democracy, and analysts do not believe his government will embark on a wholesale expropriation of companies, as Castro's government set out to do soon after taking power in 1959.

"There have been some echoes, and it's not surprising," said Wayne Smith, who was a diplomat in Cuba and now is a senior fellow at the Center for International Policy in Washington. "He's a declared admirer of Castro, and while times have changed and he can talk about moving in a certain direction, let's see what he actually does. I think conditions have changed. This is not 1959."

In Wednesday's speech, Chavez said the constitution should be changed to allow the government to take control of the natural gas industry from foreign companies, which now have wide rights in the sector. Earlier this week, he said he would increase state control over four key oil production projects. Those projects, in the Orinoco Belt of northeast Venezuela, are operated by U.S. firms such as Exxon Mobil and Chevron as well as foreign multinationals Total of [France](#) and BP.

Investors are still unclear about what his nationalization plan entails. But Ricardo Sanguino, head of the finance commission in the National Assembly, told reporters Wednesday that the government would negotiate settlements with companies it plans to nationalize.

"We're not going to do anything illegal," he said. "There will always be compensation."

Chavez said the plunge in the Caracas stock exchange this week was an exaggeration and instead lauded the country's booming economy, which expanded 10 percent last year. Shares of the CANTV telephone company, which is expected to be nationalized, rebounded after Sanguino's assurances to investors. Meanwhile, the oil markets and energy companies took a wait-and-see attitude, noted David Mares, a political science professor at the University of California at San Diego who has studied the Venezuelan oil industry.

"He's announcing that he's going to do what the markets already expected him to do -- take more control of the profits of the Venezuelan production," Mares said by telephone. "He has not said that nationalization in the Orinoco means 100 percent Venezuelan ownership."

Still, the tone and substance of Chavez's recent declarations have worried many Venezuelans, opposition leaders in Caracas and rights groups. The president reiterated Wednesday that he will advance a proposal to allow him to run for reelection in 2012.

"I've proposed, and we're writing the proposal for the indefinite reelection of the president of the republic," Chavez said to applause. With all 167 members of the National Assembly in his camp, thanks to an opposition boycott of congressional elections in 2005, the measure and others proposed by Chavez are expected to pass easily.

"With the indefinite reelection and the new model he's talking about, what has been announced today is part of an era that is much harder," Ernesto Alvarenga, a founder of Chavez's movement and now an opponent, said by phone from Caracas. "I think we're definitively in a phase of Chavista hegemony," he said, using the name given to the president's followers.

After winning office in December 1998, in an election that obliterated Venezuela's two long-ruling parties, Chavez set about purging elites from office and holding referendums that led to a redrafting of the constitution and a shift in control in the National Assembly. The new constitution lengthened presidential terms and permitted reelection, and in 2000 Chavez won his first six-year term.

He has installed military officers in all levels of government and packed the Supreme Court, and now says he will end the autonomy of the Central Bank.

Chavez has also become wildly popular among the poor, who have benefited from billions of dollars in oil revenue that Chavez has spent on education, nutrition and medical programs. But critics say he plays on the most base instincts of his countrymen, benefiting from conflicts with business sectors, opposition groups and the news media. On Wednesday, he reiterated his criticism of the Roman Catholic Church, which has questioned his plan not to renew a television station license.

Chavez said that one archbishop, Roberto Luckert, is "going to hell," and he told Cardinal Jorge Urosa that the church had gone too far by meddling in state affairs. "Mr. Cardinal," Chavez said, "the state respects the church. The church should respect the state."