

# **Chávez given power to rule Venezuela by decree**

## **President Bush said he was 'worried' about Venezuela's democratic institutions after that country's president was allowed to rule by decree for 18 months.**

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**CARACAS** - At a special open-air session Wednesday, the Venezuelan National Assembly granted President Hugo Chávez the power to legislate by decree for the next 18 months on a broad range of social, economic and military affairs.

Government supporters trumpeted the legislation as a sign of "people power," but critics in Venezuela fear that the law undermines democracy, and in a rare direct reference to Venezuela, President Bush said he was troubled by the moves of his Venezuelan counterpart.

"I'm concerned about the Venezuelan people, and I'm worried about the diminution of democratic institution[s]," Bush, who bears the brunt of routine and ferocious attacks by Chávez, told Fox News Channel.

A former army lieutenant who participated in a failed coup in 1992, Chávez won the presidency in 1998. He has since worked hard to fill important military, judicial and legislative posts with his allies and has sought legislation to curb attacks of the press on government institutions.

Chávez has also increased relations with Cuba, Syria and Iran, while severing ties with the United States on some levels, because he says the United States participated in a failed coup against him in 2002.

Bush administration officials deny those claims, but the United States remains the main subject of Chávez's tirades as well as Venezuela's principal trading partner. Chávez has called Bush an imperialist and a devil, but the administration has toned down its criticism of Venezuela lately and has said it wants a more constructive dialogue with the Chávez government.

But Wednesday's National Assembly meeting seemed to confirm that Chávez will speed up implementation of his "21st century socialism."

The vaguely worded law will enable Chávez to legislate without parliamentary debate or consultation on issues ranging from the "transformation of the institutions of the state" to policing and judiciary issues.

The law is a sign of "revolutionary times, comparable only to the glorious days of our war of independence," the assembly's second vice president from the Communist Party, Roberto Hernández, said in an opening speech to the assembly and to the throngs of government supporters who filled a plaza in central Caracas to observe the session.

In the open-air session, which the government touted as a way of taking the parliament to the people, the assembly met under six white awnings, clustered around a bronze equestrian statue of Venezuelan independence hero and Chávez's revolutionary symbol, Simón Bolívar, in the downtown square that bears Bolívar's name.

### **CHAVEZ BACKERS**

A small audience of public employees held placards -- one of which read, "With Chávez the people rule" -- and they enthusiastically raised their hands when assembly President Cilia Flores called for a vote.

"Approved unanimously, including the vote of the people," Flores announced to their cheers.

However, for the opposition, which has had no legislative representation since it boycotted the elections of December 2005, there was little cause for celebration.

"This is a show, a piece of theater to give the appearance of popular support for something no one there knows the details of," said Gerardo Blyde, a former opposition legislator and constitutional lawyer.

Blyde said no other president in modern times has been granted such sweeping powers. "This is a process in which democracy loses more space every day, and autocracy gains more," he added.

Between 40 and 60 pieces of legislation may be approved under the enabling law, Vice President Jorge Rodríguez said.

Among them are likely to be a law creating a new national police force, and a detailed legal plan for the military reserve and territorial guards, which the opposition sees as political militias under the direct control of the president.

## **PREVIOUS LAW**

A similar, though more strictly defined, law granted to Chávez in 2000-01 resulted in 49 decrees, which sparked a major political crisis lasting three years.

Also contemplated is a law defining the role of "communal councils," the grass-roots assemblies directly dependent on the presidency, which Chávez wants to turn into the principal building blocks of his "21st century socialism."

One area likely to be of particular concern to foreign investors is energy, which was added at the last minute, reportedly in response to popular demand.

Chávez is expected to swiftly nationalize Caracas' electricity provider as well as take a majority stake in four heavy oil projects in the Orinoco River basin, currently controlled by five of the largest multinational oil companies in the world, including U.S.-based ExxonMobil and ConocoPhillips.

The Venezuelan assembly also mentioned the telecommunications industry in the law, an indication that the president will likely move quickly to nationalize telecommunications company CANTV, Venezuela's only publicly traded entity on the New York Stock Exchange.

In his conversation with Fox News, Bush said he was concerned about the nationalizations.

"My worry, of course, is that the nationalization of industry will make it harder for the Venezuelan people to be lifted out of poverty, will make it harder for the people to realize their full potential," he said.

Manuel Rodríguez, 59, who works in a warehouse belonging to the Venezuelan government's subsidized food chain, Mercal, said that he, too, feared the new law.

"Personally, I don't entirely agree with giving him all these powers," Rodríguez said. "It's dangerous to put all the power in the hands of one person."

But Vice President Rodríguez ridiculed the law's critics in his speech. The law, he said, was adopted to "sow democracy, peace and eventually socialism."

