

SCHOOLS NEXT ON CHÁVEZ'S TO-DO LIST

Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez is trying to push his socialist revolution into the classroom, and his Marxist brother is in charge of it.

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CARACAS --There are few people President Hugo Chávez trusts more than his older brother, Adán. So when Chávez named Adán as education minister, it was clear he wanted to steer his socialist revolution into the classroom.

The appointment set off alarm bells for some since Adán, a self-professed Marxist, has spent the past three years as ambassador to Cuba, where the public schools follow the communist line and private schools are banned.

But the Venezuelan government has denied any intention to turn schools into ideological training centers, and a new type of school already under the president's control is far from radically changing the Venezuelan classroom culture.

"There is no need to fear the changes," Adán Chávez told state television on Feb. 14, shortly after he took over the education ministry. "It's false that we're going to dress the children in red," the president's iconic color.

Since winning a landslide reelection in December, President Chávez has accelerated his plan to implement what he calls "21st century socialism." He already has nationalized telecommunications and electricity companies and issued a decree to regain a majority stake in oil-field and refinery projects.

The president has also said he will revamp education K-12 and put Adán in charge of sending out thousands of teachers who will "educate" adults from the factories to the ports.

"We have to create new values, and new values are created through education," Adán Chávez told a gathering of local officials last month. "This is a fight of values versus [the] anti-values that this society has injected in them for many years, like egotism and individualism.

"We're not going to strike fear in the kids," he added. "We're simply going to inject authentic values of society and what is socialism."

SOME CONCERNS

No details of the planned revamp have been made public so far, but Adán's comments have raised concerns among some Venezuelans.

"I want my grandchildren to have free education," said Nancy Cordero, a shop owner on the outskirts of Caracas who fears that Chávez wants to politically indoctrinate children. "But I don't want them learning that Fidel Castro is a hero of the fatherland."

Chávez's decision to entrust Adán with his education reform plans seems to fit perfectly with the president's socialist designs. The eldest of six siblings, Adán is a former science professor at the University of the Andes in the southwestern city of Mérida, who helped bring his younger brother into the revolutionary ideology in the early 1980s. That eventually led to the former army lieutenant colonel's participation in a failed coup in 1992.

Adán served as the president's Cabinet chief until 2002, when he was sent to Cuba as ambassador, overseeing Venezuelan subsidies to Havana that now hover at an estimated \$2 billion per year and getting a firsthand look at a "socialist" educational system.

President Chávez already has launched some educational reforms. He has started several new universities. And since 2004, the government has taken over or set up 5,000 kindergarten, elementary and high schools where teachers and administrators say they are slowly implementing a new pedagogy.

"We're trying to get them away from learning how to crave material things," said María de la Paz Regeiro, head of the Bolivarian high schools, named for Simón Bolívar, the president's hero and the man who led a territory from Peru to Venezuela to independence from Spain in the 19th century.

Regeiro and others acknowledged, however, that there are a lot of challenges ahead, and a recent visit to one of the Bolivarian schools in Caracas showed that the students are having a difficult time adjusting to a new type of instruction.

Located just a few blocks from the presidential palace, the Francisco Toro High School has few of the trappings that one would expect from a "socialist" school. There is but one poster of the president, in the director's office, and the library carries the classics from Chekhov to Oscar Wilde.

Administrators say the school mainly services "at-risk" students from the surrounding low-income neighborhood, and many of the students say they dream of going to the United States where they believe they might have more opportunities.

History books on hand say Chávez's failed coup in 1992 earned "historical legitimization" because of the backing of the Venezuelan people. There is no mention of Chávez's brand of socialism, since they predate many of his initiatives.

The major difference between the Bolivarian and traditional public high schools, teachers and students say, is that the Bolivarian school offers more art, dance and music classes; the students frequently work in groups and go on field trips, and the teacher-student relationship is more egalitarian -- they call each other by their first names.

CHAOTIC RESULTS

The result is often more chaotic than educational: On the day The Miami Herald visited the Francisco Toro school, students ran up and down the hallways, and there seemed to be little classroom instruction.

"I'm a little permissive, I know," said Juana Sierra, the school's director. "But how am I going to prohibit something from a kid who has been abused and has had everything prohibited his whole life?"

For some students, the school works.

"This is a more dynamic environment," said 16-year old Estefani Lobo. "Before, we were the peons. Now it's more equal."

But test scores from the Bolivarian high schools are below average, according to José Texeira, who heads one of the largest teachers' unions in Venezuela. He said the high schools' extracurricular offerings and freedom are positive steps, but the learning side is still lacking.

"These are like a depository for parents to simply leave their kids for the day," he said.

Even some teachers are skeptical. "I believe in the project," said Abel Cabrera, a social sciences teacher. "But we have to make some adjustments."