

Chávez makes his forces salute with slogan

President Hugo Chávez's order to the armed forces to use a socialist slogan violates a 1999 constitutional ban on politicizing the military.

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CARACAS --

Venezuelan armed forces members have been ordered to use the Fidel Castro-inspired slogan "Motherland, socialism or death!" whenever they address superiors, despite a constitutional ban on political activity by the military.

Gen. Alberto Müller Rojas, head of the presidential general staff, has defended the new order, saying that the military has always been politicized. Under past governments, he said, soldiers did not make political declarations openly, "but surreptitiously, through the persecution of those who did not share their ideas."

Venezuela's leftist President Hugo Chávez, advocating what he calls "21st century socialism," told a military audience in mid-April that they were obliged to use the new slogan "without ambiguity and without complexes."

BIG CONSEQUENCES

Dressed in military fatigues and a red beret, the president -- a former army lieutenant-colonel who is also commander-in-chief of the armed forces -- added that if any military personnel felt uncomfortable with the order, "they had better ask to be discharged."

Since then, his instructions have been passed down the chain of command.

In an unclassified "naval message," dated May 2, members of the navy were informed that the slogan, "must be used especially when a subordinate addresses a superior . . . before asking permission to speak and [before] leaving."

A copy of the message, signed by vice-admiral Benigno Calvo, commander of the Venezuelan navy, was obtained by The Miami Herald. Its authenticity was confirmed days later by Müller Rojas.

The country's 1999 constitution, once described by Chávez as "the best in the world" gave members of the armed forces the vote for the first time. But article 328 states that the military is "exclusively at the service of the Nation, and under no circumstances at that of any individual or political tendency."

Article 330 prohibits military personnel from engaging in "acts of propaganda, militancy or political proselytism."

Many armed forces members who signed petitions calling for a recall referendum against Chávez, held in 2004 and won by Chávez, were discharged on the grounds that they had taken part in politics.

'DOUBLE STANDARD'

In April 2006, the Venezuelan Supreme Court ruled that signing the recall petition amounted to "political proselytism," thus approving the dismissals.

"There's a double standard here," said Ana Julia Jatar, author of a 2006 book on political discrimination in Venezuela. "Those who sign a petition are thrown out of the military for proselytizing, while those who shout 'socialism or death' are rewarded."

In his April speech this year, Chávez argued that calls for the armed forces to remain politically neutral were ``a way of disguising . . . a position contrary to the government, the revolution and the mandate of the people."

The government also maintains that, since a majority voted for Chávez and his socialist platform in the December presidential elections, it is only right that the country's institutions should fall into line.

"The dominant sector of the country amounts to 70 percent of Venezuelans," said Müller. ``The other 30 percent will have to get used to it."