

# Chavez's plans worry Catholic leaders

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CARACAS, Venezuela --

Roman Catholic leaders said Saturday they are worried about President Hugo Chavez's plans to rewrite the constitution, and said he has no right to insult priests who publicly disagree with him.

Chavez has proposed doing away with presidential term limits as part of constitutional reforms, which would allow him to run again in 2012 and beyond. He says any constitutional changes would have to be approved in a popular vote.

But the Venezuelan Bishops' Conference has complained that reform proposals are being drafted without public involvement by a committee that Chavez appointed.

The process raises "serious doubts about the democratic appearance of the constitutional reform," the church leaders said Saturday.

Interior Minister Pedro Carreno called the comments "one more broadside of insults" from the Catholic leadership.

Insisting the public will have ample input in the reforms, Carreno said the vast majority of Venezuelans are with Chavez, and that church leaders are defending "the interests of the oligarchy."

Chavez, an admirer of Cuba's Fidel Castro, has repeatedly clashed with church leaders, and recently lambasted the Catholic leadership as "liars" and "perverts."

The church leaders said Saturday that "no one, much less the president ... has a right to insult or attack people or institutions who dissent."

The priests called for reconciliation to heal Venezuela's deep political divisions. They also expressed doubts about Chavez's efforts for the poor and said they are concerned about upcoming education reforms, citing fears that schools could take on an "ideological and political orientation."

Chavez points to figures showing reduced poverty, and denies any plans to indoctrinate children.