

# Chavez: Catholic Church losing backing

The Miami Herald  
Jul. 16, 2007

CARACAS, Venezuela --

President Hugo Chavez criticized Venezuela's Roman Catholic leaders on Monday for condemning his plans to rewrite the constitution, saying the church is losing support in this politically divided nation because priests are meddling in politics.

The Venezuelan Bishops' Conference complains that proposals for the forthcoming constitutional reform are being drafted without public involvement by a committee appointed by Chavez.

"They act as if they were a political party," Chavez said during a televised speech. "Everyday, there are fewer Catholics in the world, and in Venezuela, and that's worrisome. The attitudes among Venezuela's Catholic hierarchy is one of the causes."

Chavez - a close ally of Cuban leader Fidel Castro - lambasted the clergy of "lying" about his plans for the reform, warning Venezuela's Catholic Church leaders they were "sinning" by spreading falsehoods.

Since taking office in 1999, Chavez has repeatedly clashed with church leaders. But tensions between the bishops' conference and Chavez's administration have grown particularly tense in recent months.

Critics accuse Chavez of becoming increasingly authoritarian as he steers Venezuela toward socialism. Many fear the former paratroop commander will use the pending constitutional reform to lay a legal framework allowing him to override democratic institutions such as the National Assembly.

In an interview published last week by the local El Universal newspaper, Cardinal Jorge Urosa Savino, the Vatican's top representative in Venezuela, reiterated the church's reform-related concerns.

"We are in an absurd situation in which one person tries to become the only, lifelong authority," Urosa Savino was quoted as saying. "A constitutional reform done behind the country's back or cooked up by a small group will be a failure."