

Chavez calls Honduran cardinal a 'clown'

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CARACAS, Venezuela --

President Hugo Chavez called a cardinal from Honduras an "imperialist clown" after the Roman Catholic prelate warned of increasing authoritarianism under the Venezuelan leader.

"Another parrot of imperialism appeared, this time dressed as a cardinal. That's to say, another imperialist clown," Chavez was quoted as saying in a bulletin posted Tuesday on the state-run news agency's Web site.

Chavez - a close ally of Cuba's Fidel Castro - was responding to criticism from Honduran Cardinal Oscar Andres Rodriguez Maradiaga, who said in a recent interview cited by Venezuela's Bolivarian News Agency that Chavez "thinks he's God and can trample upon other people."

Chavez made the comments during a government event late Monday. He has repeatedly clashed with Catholic Church leaders in Venezuela, calling them "liars" and "perverts," but he rarely targets high-ranking priests abroad.

Catholic leaders in this South American country have warned of alleged threats to individual freedoms under Chavez's administration and criticized his plans for a sweeping constitutional reform to transform Venezuela into a socialist state.

Chavez has repeatedly lambasted the local Catholic hierarchy in recent weeks, saying it should be dedicated to parishioners rather than meddling in politics by siding with opposition parties.

Rodriguez Maradiaga, considered a moderate, is one of the most prominent Catholic leaders in the Americas and has often been mentioned as a possible pope.