

# Lawmakers OK Chavez's reforms

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CARACAS, Venezuela --

Venezuela's congress, dominated by allies of President Hugo Chavez, gave initial approval Tuesday to constitutional reforms that would allow him to run for re-election and possibly govern for decades to come.

After about six hours of debate, National Assembly president Cilia Flores said Chavez's proposed changes to the constitution, including the lifting of presidential term limits, received "majority approval."

Flores did not say how many of the 167 lawmakers voted in favor of the reforms, saying only that they were approved with overwhelming support. Final approval is expected within two or three months, and the changes would have to be approved by voters in a referendum.

The National Assembly has been solidly pro-Chavez since the opposition boycotted a 2005 vote and had been expected to sign off on the changes proposed by Chavez in Tuesday's first reading. The reforms, if approved, would extend presidential terms from six to seven years and allow Chavez to run again in 2013.

Government opponents have attacked the reforms, saying they will weaken democracy by permitting Chavez to become a lifelong leader like his ally Fidel Castro of Cuba.

Chavez, a former paratrooper who was re-elected by a wide margin in December on promises to steer the country toward socialism, says the changes will give Venezuelans greater decision-making power and aid the transfer of billions of dollars from Venezuela's foreign reserves into social programs.

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Garcia said issues "such as the economic path of a new society" must be discussed.

"This isn't just any debate," he said.

Garcia was a rare critical voice during the debate, in which lawmakers stood up one by one to voice their support for the reforms.

Other reforms would create new types of property to be managed by cooperatives, give neighborhood-based "communal councils" administrative responsibilities usually reserved for elected officials and create "a popular militia" that would form part of the military. The workday would also be reduced to six hours.

Flores said government-friendly lawmakers have the right to approve the reforms without changing the proposal that Chavez presented last week.

"We are not imposing anything," she told state television.

Earlier Tuesday, former Chavez mentor Luis Miquilena urged Venezuelans to reject the proposed constitutional changes, saying the president would use them to govern indefinitely.

Miquilena, who headed a popularly elected, pro-Chavez assembly that drafted Venezuela's existing constitution, called his former ally's new reform proposal "a constitutional fraud" aimed at giving him "perpetual power."

"The essential point of this reform is based on the idea of permitting Mr. Chavez to continue in power indefinitely," Miquilena told a news conference.

Miquilena, an 88-year-old former labor leader, once was commonly referred to as Chavez's closest adviser. But he quit his Cabinet in 2002 and has periodically criticized the president since then.