

Editorial

## Mr. Chávez's Power Grab

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Newspeak is alive and well in Venezuela. Last week, President Hugo Chávez portrayed planned constitutional amendments that would allow him to be re-elected indefinitely as a step toward “participatory democracy.”

Mr. Chávez's plan is just another step in the march to increase his government's control over Venezuela's politics and economy. Behind the Orwellian rhetorical tactics, his efforts to amass power and cling to it for as long as he can are undermining Venezuela's democracy.

Mr. Chávez remains, at least technically, a democrat. He has repeatedly beaten Venezuela's dysfunctional opposition in elections deemed fair by international observers. He won a landslide victory last December, extending his mandate until 2012. His proposed constitutional reforms must be submitted to a vote in the National Assembly and to a referendum.

But his government's veneer of democratic respectability is wearing thin. Every member of the National Assembly is an ally of Mr. Chávez. His allies also run the Supreme Court, all but two state governments and *Petróleos de Venezuela*, the state oil company.

And his government has not been shy about using the apparatus of the state to boost Mr. Chávez's vast popularity among Venezuela's poor. After the government revoked the license of RCTV, an aggressive opposition television network, the government used it to create another pro-government mouthpiece. Buoyed by a public spending spree financed by high oil prices, Mr. Chávez has used his enormous popularity to extend his government's power over big chunks of the economy, including the telephone and electricity companies.

His reform proposals would tighten the grip, nationalizing coal and gas, stripping the central bank of its independence and allowing the government to carry out expropriations of private property without obtaining judicial authority first.

Mr. Chávez's claim that he is increasing “participatory democracy” by giving voice to Venezuela's disenfranchised poor rests on gestures like the proposal to create grass-roots governing councils with executive authority over a range of issues. In fact, they would further erode democratic checks and balances by stripping power from state and local governments, where opposition parties retain some vestigial power, and giving it to entities dependent on the central government.

Indeed, Mr. Chávez's plan to allow himself to run for re-election as many times as he wants — to achieve his stated goal of governing until the 200th anniversary of Venezuelan

independence in 2021 — could lock Venezuela in the grip of an all-powerful strongman for years to come. It's participatory democracy in which only Mr. Chávez and his friends get to participate.