

# Moving Clocks Ahead, Reaching Back in Time

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CARACAS, CITY'S Routine Will Adjust to New Time Zone," read Thursday's headline of *Últimas Noticias*, the most widely circulated daily in Caracas. The tabloid, sympathetic to President [Hugo Chávez](#), went on to describe the benefits of his plan to move clocks forward by half an hour in a bid to improve the "metabolism" of his fellow citizens.

In a time of startling policy announcements from Mr. Chávez, it is no wonder that picking up a newspaper in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela can sometimes feel like perusing *The Onion*. Recent statements by Mr. Chávez have some Venezuelans pondering the inspiration for his latest moves.

Last Sunday, Mr. Chávez rolled out plans to build a set of artificial island-cities, intended to demarcate Venezuela's sovereignty in the Caribbean, and to import 5,000 Russian sniper rifles to arm guerrillas in the event of an American invasion. It was also the day he announced the change in time zone.

Such announcements reflect the deep changes to political institutions that have allowed Mr. Chávez to solidify his grip on power. His is a government intent on leaving a symbolic mark on everything from the country's coat of arms — redesigned with a white horse pointing leftward in sync with the president's left-wing ideas — to its oil tankers, renamed in honor of historical figures instead of beauty queens.

The time-change proposal — planned to accompany a shift to a six-hour workday as Mr. Chávez accelerates a socialist-inspired project to transform Venezuelan society — raised eyebrows around the world.

It would put Venezuela in company with Afghanistan, India, Iran and Myanmar, countries that offset time in half-hour increments from Greenwich Mean Time. (Nepal stands out, with its clocks 15 minutes ahead of India and 5 hours and 45 minutes ahead of Greenwich, England.)

Mr. Chávez's highest-ranking science adviser, Héctor Navarro, whose official title is minister of the popular power for science and technology, justified the change by saying it would improve the metabolism and productivity of Venezuelans by giving them more access to sunlight each day.

Politics is also at play in the time-zone change. Mr. Navarro told Venezuela's official news agency that the move would reverse a decision to turn back the clocks by a half-hour in the mid-1960's during the administration of an earlier president, Raúl Leoni, a "government of the interests of the bourgeoisie in which aspects which affected human beings were tied to the profits of companies."

With proposals from Mr. Chávez and his senior officials growing more unpredictable, Francisco Rodríguez, once a supporter of Mr. Chávez as chief economist of the National Assembly and now a critic, recommends a close reading of Venezuela's rich history of "caudillos," or strongmen, as a way to understand its current state.

MR. Rodríguez, who teaches Latin American studies at [Wesleyan University](#), said Mr. Chávez's closest predecessor in style was Cipriano Castro, who ruled the country from 1899 to 1908. Like Mr. Chávez, Mr. Castro took control of foreign companies and dreamed of restoring Simón Bolívar's "Greater Colombia" project for a union of Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador.

Mr. Castro also had little regard for Venezuela's haughty economic elite. He had the country's bankers put in chains, paraded through Caracas and thrown in prison for refusing to roll over the domestic debt. They did so the next day.

And, Mr. Rodríguez said, Mr. Castro's constitutional reform of 1904 is "eerily similar" to Mr. Chávez's constitutional overhaul this month, in eliminating term limits, increasing the number of vice presidents and greatly reducing the power of provincial governments.

"The good news for anti-Chavistas is that Castro stayed in power only until 1908," Mr. Rodríguez said. "The bad news is that he was replaced by his vice president, Juan Vicente Gómez, who remained in power until 1935."

Given the theatrical aspects of Mr. Chávez, it can be easy to lose sight of the breadth of the political and economic change he has put in motion, both at home and abroad.

Within [OPEC](#), Mr. Chávez helped straighten the cartel's spine through frenzied lobbying for cuts in oil production, contributing to climbing oil prices this decade.

And he has challenged the supremacy of the [International Monetary Fund](#) and [World Bank](#) in Latin American financial circles by offering cut-rate loans to countries like Argentina, Bolivia and Ecuador.

But Mr. Chávez's most radical changes have taken place in Venezuela, especially since his re-election in December to a six-year term.

He has forged a single Socialist Party for his followers; nationalized oil, telephone and electricity companies; forced a critical television station off the public airwaves; and strengthened, amid climbing inflation, price controls on basic foods like chicken, milk and eggs.

His ambitions to rewrite the Constitution would tighten his control over political institutions, effectively circumscribing the influence of opponents in charge of a few municipal and state governments. Mr. Chávez's loyalists already control the [Supreme Court](#), the federal bureaucracy, the National Assembly and every state-owned company.

Most controversially, the reform project would allow Mr. Chávez to be re-elected indefinitely and carve out new regional governing entities run by vice presidents appointed by the president.

It is not without irony that Tal Cual, an opposition newspaper, is referring to Mr. Chávez as “Yo-el-supremo,” or “I, the Supreme,” after the classic novel of the same name by Augusto Roa Bastos on the life of the Paraguayan dictator José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia.

“The president wants to carry out a ‘constitutional’ coup to perpetuate himself in power,” said Teodoro Petkoff, a former guerrilla with impeccable leftist credentials who is the editor of Tal Cual.

With such dreary assessments of Mr. Chávez’s rule coming from some quarters, the potentially positive effects of some of his ideas, even those concerning the country’s time zone, are sometimes overlooked.

Víctor Rodríguez, a respected astrophysicist in Maracaibo, said the measure was justified since it would cut down on energy consumption.

“I’m not a Chavista; I don’t have a position in the government; but speaking truthfully, this will benefit the country,” Mr. Rodríguez said. “Every country has the liberty to choose its own time zone.”