

Some Chavez allies slow to shed luxuries

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CARACAS, Venezuela --

Hugo Chavez constantly urges his supporters to reject "savage capitalism," but allies of Venezuela's president have been slow to embrace his socialist values - and some are struggling to explain their consumption of luxury goods.

Justice Minister Pedro Carreno became the subject of widespread criticism and ridicule by local media this week, when a journalist asked if it wasn't contradictory to attack capitalism while sporting a \$180 Louis Vuitton tie and \$500 Gucci shoes.

Apparently caught off guard, Carreno stammered unintelligibly for a few seconds before responding: "It's not contradictory because I would like Venezuela to produce all this, that way I could purchase things produced here instead of 95 percent of what we consume being imported."

Poking fun at Carreno in an editorial published in the Tal Cual daily on Friday, comedian Laureano Marquez wrote a fictional response from the government official.

"Do you think that I, as a revolutionary, am not disgusted by having this imperialist trash around my neck? Of course, but I don't have any other option while locally made ties are not produced," Marquez wrote.

A video clip of Carreno's statements had been viewed more than 20,000 times on Friday, two days after it was posted on the YouTube Web site.

Chavez - a close ally of Cuban leader Fidel Castro - preaches socialist ideals, but persuading Venezuelans to adopt more austere lifestyles has been a daunting task in this oil-rich South American country characterized by unchecked consumerism.

Carreno isn't the only government official with a penchant for well-to-do outfits or luxury cars.

Information Minister Willian Lara often wears Tommy Hilfiger jackets, although they are red - the color of Chavez's ruling party. And Luis Acosta, the pro-Chavez governor of Carabobo state, argued last year that authorities can purchase expensive cars without sacrificing their revolutionary ideals.

"Is it that we revolutionaries don't have the right to have a Hummer or a car? If we make money, we can do it," Acosta said.

Such statements - and shows of opulence among some of Chavez's closest allies - prompted the socialist president to later reprimand supporters for failing to shed their materialist ways.

Threatening to impose new taxes on luxury goods in October, Chavez said: "What kind of revolution is this? The Whisky Revolution? The Hummer Revolution? No, this is a real revolution!"