

New Charter Would Widen Chávez's Reach

Venezuelan Lawmakers Poised To Send Amendments to Voters

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BOGOTA, Colombia, Oct. 30 -- Under a new constitution being considered in [Venezuela](#), the workday would be slashed from eight hours to six, so workers would have sufficient time for "personal development." But while Venezuelans might have more leisure time, the constitution would also ensure that President Hugo Chávez could toil far into the future.

One of the most controversial proposals in the charter would abolish presidential term limits, giving the 53-year-old populist the opportunity to remain in office indefinitely. The presidential term would also be extended from six to seven years. To Chávez's supporters, it makes perfect sense.

"We're giving the leader the possibility to continue directing us," Mario Isea, a legislator, said in a speech. "And we're giving ourselves the opportunity to continue enjoying his leadership."

[Venezuela's National Assembly](#), stacked with Chávez supporters, approved the proposals in the new charter one by one last week and is set to make a final endorsement of the document Friday. A referendum is expected to be held Dec. 2 to allow voters to approve or reject it.

A wide variety of critics, from the Catholic Church to opposition leaders, say the 69 proposals in the charter give even more power to a leader who already controls the legislature, the courts, the state oil company and, increasingly, the mass media. Opposition leaders also accuse the government of trying to ram the constitution through with little public debate.

On Tuesday, a prominent business chamber, Consecomercio, called on the president to withdraw the proposed charter. And First Justice, an opposition party with no representation in the legislature, publicly criticized the changes in front of the National Assembly after seeking unsuccessfully to join a procedural debate.

"What this proposal does is further divide the country," Julio Borges, director of First Justice, told reporters.

The government counters that the amendments were amply deliberated. Three rounds of debate took place in the 167-member National Assembly, whose members have been allied with the president since opposition politicians boycotted parliamentary elections in 2005.

The lawmakers traveled nationwide to discuss the proposals with community groups at more than 9,000 public events. In voting on individual proposals, 160 lawmakers supported the changes; seven abstained.

The government also denies charges by opponents that the proposals are designed to keep Chávez in power, saying critics ignore the fact that the new constitution would not restrict opponents from mounting campaigns against the government.

Instead, officials say, the changes are designed to accelerate Chávez's plan to transform the oil-rich country into a socialist state, one the president says will help lift people out of poverty. "This constitutional reform is imperative for the revolution," he said earlier this month.

Luis Vicente León, a pollster for Datanalisis, a [Caracas](#) firm, said in an interview Tuesday that the public is equally divided among supporters, opponents and the undecided. But he said it would be hard to stop Chávez, a tireless and effective campaigner who has yet to lose an election since winning the presidency in 1998.

Chávez also has outlets for pushing the proposals publicly, including his weekly Sunday television show.

"The campaign begins this Sunday, and obviously Chávez is an excellent candidate," León said.

Opposition groups are promising a wide range of responses, from protests and voter drives to abstention.

Under the proposed changes, Chávez, who has already nationalized electric and telephone utilities and wrested the oil industry from private companies, would have more leverage in economic decisions.

The Central Bank, for instance, would be largely under his control. The proposed constitution gives prominence to cooperatives and highlights the importance of the state in creating companies, which it says must be done "under the principles of a socialist economy."

Worrisome to human rights groups is a vaguely worded amendment that would give the government, in a state of emergency, the power to suspend due process guarantees protected under the existing constitution. "The final version will have some due process guarantees, but not all of them," said Daniel Wilkinson, deputy director of the Americas division at [Human Rights Watch](#). "The presumption of innocence and the right to a fair trial are the ones that stand out."

While some amendments were proposed by the National Assembly, others came directly from Chávez. One article proposed by the president would prevent nongovernmental organizations involved in politics from receiving foreign donations, a change that would affect groups including Sumate, an anti-Chávez election-monitoring group that has had U.S. backing and helped organize a recall referendum against Chávez in 2004. It would also increase from 20 to 30 percent the signatures of registered voters needed to bring about a recall.

"The reform is not justified," [Manuel Rosales](#), an opposition leader who lost to Chávez in last December's election, said in a recent interview. "He wants to establish a political system that permits him to be reelected for life and be the eternal president of Venezuela."

Since his reelection last year to a six-year term, Chávez has moved quickly to implement economic, social and political reforms that are transforming his country.

The National Assembly gave him wide-ranging powers that permit him to enact economic laws by decree. The government quickly assumed majority control of four oil projects previously run by [ExxonMobil](#), [ConocoPhillips](#) and other major oil firms. Chávez has also forged a tight alliance with [Iran](#), irritating the Bush administration.

In an increasingly tense environment, the Catholic Church has emerged as perhaps the most vocal opponent of the proposed changes. In a statement this month, the church hierarchy said that while the reforms are "presented as an instrument giving major power to the people," they are in reality designed to "concentrate power in the hands of the president of the republic." Chávez was quick to shoot back.

"They say the reform is morally unacceptable," the president said in a recent national broadcast. "They are the ones who are morally unacceptable."