

Venezuela's slide toward dictatorship

OUR OPINION: CONSTITUTION CHANGES ARE POWER GRAB BY HUGO CHAVEZ

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Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's proposed constitutional changes go far beyond "reforms." The 69 amendments blessed by the Chávez-controlled legislature last week would eliminate the vestiges of democracy yet remaining in the government. Mr. Chávez could run for reelection indefinitely and concentrate virtually all state power in his hands. Democratically elected in 1998, he could rule as a dictator for decades.

Coup d'état predicted

Even one-time loyalists are condemning this unfettered power grab. Former Defense Minister Raúl Isaiás Baduel, was a key player in returning Mr. Chávez to power in 2002 after a brief coup. Yet on Monday Mr. Baduel predicted that "a coup d'état would be consummated, violating the constitutional text in a shameless way" if voters were to approve the changes on Dec. 2, the date set for a referendum.

We hope the vocal and growing opposition persuades Mr. Chávez to stop his authoritarian march. In the best case, Venezuelans would resoundingly reject the constitutional changes at the polls.

Yet the prospects seem slim for either possibility. Mr. Chávez already tightly grips electoral and judicial systems and mass media. He appears determined to wield absolute power.

The critics have good reason to protest. Among other measures, the proposed constitution would:

- **Define** the military as "anti-imperialist" and "Bolivarian." In effect, this turns the armed forces into partisan bodies committed to defending an ideology. No longer would they be professional guardians of the rule of law.
- **Define** Venezuela and its economy as "socialist." As Mr. Baduel noted, what does that mean? "Socialism" could mean the police state as practiced in Cuba.
- **Decimate** property rights by allowing the government to expropriate properties before a court order is issued, not after. The government could take farms and food producers if "food security" is at risk.
- **Allow** the president to declare indefinite states of emergency, during which civil protections are suspended. Thus, security agents could detain people who would not have a right to a fair trial.

- **Mandate** a six-hour work day. While workers love this measure, it is another costly mandate that would hamstring employers and hurt the economy.

The proposed changes are so radical and sweeping that they would amount to an altogether new constitution. Many Venezuelan lawyers argue the entire constitutional "reform" process was unconstitutional. Catholic leaders have denounced the measures, and university students have resumed their protests.

Mr. Chávez considers critics to be traitors. But it is he who is betraying democratic principles to Venezuela's detriment.