

# Mr. Chavez's Coup

## A constitutional 'reform' could complete Venezuela's transformation into a dictatorship.

Editorial  
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TENS OF thousands of Venezuelan students marched to the Supreme Court in [Caracas](#) last week to protest the new "socialist" constitutional reform that President Hugo Chavez is preparing to impose on the country. On their return, students from the Central University of Venezuela were fired on by gunmen who roared onto the campus on motorcycles. Nine were hurt; university officials later identified the shooters as members of government-sponsored paramilitary groups. That's just one example of the ugly climate of intimidation Mr. Chavez is creating in advance of a Dec. 2 referendum that he expects will formally confirm him as de facto president for life and give him powers rivaling those of his mentor, [Fidel Castro](#).

Mr. Chavez's apologists like to dismiss the Venezuelan forces opposing his deconstruction of democracy -- which include the Catholic Church, the private business community and labor unions as well as students -- as a corrupt elite. So it's worth noting what some of Mr. Chavez's long-standing allies are saying about his constitutional changes. The political party Podemos, whose members ran for parliament on a pro-Chavez platform, call it "a constitutional fraud." Mr. Chavez's recently retired defense minister, Gen. Raúl Isaías Baduel, said it was an "undemocratic imposition" and that its approval would amount to "a coup."

In fact, Mr. Chavez's rewrite would complete his transformation into an autocrat. It would lengthen his presidential term from six to seven years and remove the current limit of two terms, allowing him to serve indefinitely. He would have broad powers to seize property, to dispose of [Venezuela's](#) foreign exchange reserves, to impose central government rule on local jurisdictions and to declare indefinite states of emergency under which due process and freedom of information would be suspended. As a populist sop, one provision would reduce the workday from eight to six hours; that benefit, the state's control over national television and the voting process, and the apparent intention of many Venezuelans to stay away from the polls are expected to deliver the necessary ratification.

The strength and courage of the resistance to Mr. Chavez is nevertheless growing. Despite the attacks by government goons, students have continued to march by the thousands. Bloggers have posted photos and videos of the government-sponsored violence. Opposition leaders have continued to speak out despite being labeled "traitors" by Mr. Chavez and harassed with death threats. Venezuela is on the verge of succumbing to a dictatorship that will isolate and retard the country, maybe for decades. It's encouraging that so many of its people aren't prepared to give up their freedom without a fight.

