

# Venezuelans march to back Chavez reforms

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CARACAS, Venezuela --

Tens of thousands of President Hugo Chavez's supporters filled the streets Wednesday to back his proposed constitutional changes, while anti-government student leaders announced a bold plan to march on the presidential palace.

The demonstrations have grown as a Dec. 2 referendum nears on reforms that, among other changes, would let Chavez run for re-election indefinitely, create new types of property to managed by cooperatives and lengthen presidential terms from six to seven years.

The sea of red-clad demonstrators, including students and other government supporters, marched to the Miraflores presidential palace to show their support for the constitutional overhaul, beating drums, waving flags and blowing whistles.

"Here is the demonstration that the students are with the revolution!" Chavez told the crowd. "A solid Venezuelan revolutionary student movement has been born!"

At a separate rally in Caracas, university students who have led a street-level challenge to the president announced plans for their own march to the palace on Monday, for the first time since 2002.

"We're going to Miraflores too!" student leader Ricardo Sanchez shouted to the crowd, which repeated chants of "To Miraflores, to Miraflores!"

The government has maintained a security zone around the palace and has not permitted opposition protests in the area since 2002, when gunfire broke out during a march headed for Miraflores and 19 people were killed. The violence came shortly before Chavez's brief ouster in a coup.

He was restored two days later by military loyalists while crowds of his backers protested in the streets.

Chavez warned the crowd to watch for trouble.

"We have the pro-imperialist oligarchy desperate," Chavez said. "On alert, everybody in the street. The oligarchy is trying to destabilize the country, they're trying to generate violence. They aren't going to be able to."

Chavez supporter Osman Sanchez, a 32-year-old studying at a free state-run university, called the plan for a march on the palace "a provocation."

Some pro-Chavez marchers said they particularly like one proposed reform that would give students and university workers the power to choose administrators by direct vote.

Chavez called it a change to "take out the embedded elites who took over many of our universities."

On various university campuses, student leaders have emerged as vocal government opponents, leading marches that at times have ended in violence.

Chavez calls them a minority, labeling them "fascists" and "children of the rich."

Addressing students, the anti-Chavez leader Ricardo Sanchez said Monday's march to the heart of Chavez territory is to show that "political discrimination is finished."

Another student leader, Stalin Gonzalez, read a statement from students saying: "We want fair, transparent electoral conditions and impartiality by the electoral agency."

"It's a reform that divides the country and threatens democratic rights," Gonzalez said.