

Chavez: Only a 'traitor' will vote no

The Miami Herald
Nov. 23, 2007

CARACAS, Venezuela --

President Hugo Chavez warned his supporters on Friday that anyone voting against his proposed constitutional changes would be a "traitor," rallying his political base before a referendum that would let him seek unlimited re-election in 2012 and beyond.

Brandishing a little red book listing his desired 69 revisions to Venezuela's charter, Chavez exhorted his backers to redouble their efforts toward a victorious "yes" vote in the Dec. 2 ballot.

"He who says he supports Chavez but votes 'no' is a traitor, a true traitor," the president told an arena packed with red-clad supporters. "He's against me, against the revolution and against the people."

His speech followed the recent high-profile defection of his former Defense Minister Gen. Raul Baduel, a longtime ally who called the president's proposed reforms a "coup." Others have also broken with the Chavista movement in recent months, including politicians of the small left-leaning party Podemos.

Chavez's opponents accuse him of concentrating power and seeking to be president-for-life like his close friend Fidel Castro of Cuba. Chavez insists he will only stay on as long as Venezuelans continue to vote for him.

"If you don't approve (the referendum), maybe we'll have time for a parachute jump in five years," Chavez, a former paratrooper, told the crowd. "But if you wish - if you approve the referendum - I will stay as long as God wills! Until the last bone of my skeleton dries out!"

The proposed revisions would do away with presidential term limits, extend terms from six to seven years, let Chavez appoint regional vice presidents and eliminate Central Bank authority, among other changes.

Critics warn he would also have the power to shut down Venezuelan newspapers, television and radio stations by declaring a state of emergency, and the government could detain citizens without charges during such a period.

Chavez insists the reforms are meant to deepen democracy and give Venezuelans more of a voice in government, especially through neighborhood-based "communal" councils.

He said he plans to increase funding for the councils to 5 percent of his government's 2008 budget, or \$3.2 billion, that will go toward neighborhood projects from public housing to road paving.