

Many anti-Chávez expatriates won't vote

Many expatriate Venezuelans said they won't vote in the upcoming referendum that would give President Hugo Chávez broader powers.

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Venezuelan expatriates living in South Florida, many of whom left as President Hugo Chávez rose to power a decade ago, are keeping a wary eye on their homeland as a sweeping referendum to overhaul the constitution draws near. Although they, too, can cast votes, many plan to boycott.

Local activist groups, which in previous years have mobilized get-out-the-vote efforts, met last week to plot their strategy. They are urging fellow expats to stay home -- saying Chávez's proposed changes are illegal and the electoral process hopelessly compromised.

The proposed changes would, among other things, end term limits for the presidency -- a move expatriates say would allow Chávez to hold that office for life, likening him to his mentor and political ally, Cuba's Fidel Castro.

Supporters of Chávez's reform agenda point to provisions for a six-hour workday and state-mandated pensions for street vendors and maids.

Many younger Venezuelans say they feel disenfranchised after years of political tumult back home, and are concentrating on new lives in the United States.

At the University of Miami's Coral Gables campus, Venezuelan student Francisco Paván said he is focusing more on his life in the U.S. -- such as studying for semester finals -- than on working to oppose Chávez.

A member of the Venezuelan student association, the finance major says he is gravely concerned about the turmoil in Caracas -- where his family lives and where his father owns a factory manufacturing parts for Toyota.

NO CONFIDENCE

"I worry about their safety, and I don't want to see violence from either the official circle or the opposition," said Paván, 20. "But I don't have any confidence in the electoral commission."

Others, despite their belief that Chávez's success at the polls Sunday is a *fait accompli*, say they will nonetheless cast ballots as part of their duty as Venezuelan citizens.

"I feel bad for my nephews, my brother in Venezuela, but what can I do?" said Carlos Tassi, 67, owner of European Corner in South Miami. "It's an absurd situation."

Tassi opened his restaurant in South Miami about 15 years ago, serving up steaming cups of coffee-and-milk *marroncitos* and yellow-corn *cachapas* oozing cheese -- and offering a place for displaced Venezuelans to talk politics.

'WE HAVE TO DO IT'

"Whether it counts or not, we have to do it," said customer Rosa Goncalves, who has lived in Miami for 12 years and recently returned from a four-day visit to Caracas.

She plans to vote Sunday, despite her suspicions that the referendum may be rigged in Chávez's favor -- accusations that have plagued previous elections, but which have been dismissed by officials in Caracas as well as the Miami consulate.

"That is a story that has been repeated, and I don't know why," said Consul General Antonio Hernández Borgo, whose Miami office provides services to Venezuelans living in Florida, Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina.

"It is not a perfect system, like anything man-made," Hernández Borgo said. "But we encourage everyone to come and participate in democracy."

The Venezuelan government was leasing a section of Tropical Park for the Sunday referendum, but on Monday the consulate's website listed the polling place as its Brickell Avenue office.

The Miami consulate is seeking volunteer poll workers. Hernández Borgo said he is unsure what the voter turnout will be.

According to the U.S. Census, there are 40,000 Venezuelans living in South Florida, although immigration experts and expats say the number is much higher. Asylum applications have spiked in recent months.

18,000 STRONG

There are roughly 18,000 Venezuelans of voting age on the official registry living in the consulate's district. Some would have to travel hundreds of miles to Miami-Dade to vote.

"We could have all 18,000 or we could have two people," Hernández Borgo said. "We have to prepare."

Local human rights activist Patricia Andrade said the Venezuelan government's assertions that the votes will be fairly counted are laughable. A poll watcher during last year's election, in which she hoped to see Chávez's opponent win the presidency, Andrade said she has lost faith in the process.

"We are actually trying to spread the word for people not to participate," said Andrade, head of the Venezuelan Awareness Foundation in Miami-Dade.

Along with other activist groups, Andrade's organization met Wednesday at a Doral warehouse to discuss the anti-voting campaign.

It's a striking reversal from previous years, when groups such as hers tried to mobilize South Florida's Venezuelan community to vote *en masse*.

More than 10,000 Venezuelans came to Miami last year to cast ballots in the presidential election.

Chávez's victory dealt many expatriate organizations a crippling blow.

CHAVEZ SUPPORT

While anti-Chávez groups in the United States are the most vocal, expats who support the Venezuelan president also have created a support system of sorts. Pro-Chávez groups called Bolivarian Circles have popped up throughout the country, including in South Florida, although their members generally avoid the spotlight.

Following the 2006 election, organizers of a key Venezuelan group in South Florida announced they would encourage members to focus on building political influence in the U.S. -- citing disgust with the electoral process in their homeland.

The group, Independent Venezuelan-American Citizens, said its members would focus on encouraging naturalized expatriates to run for local office. This week, the group issued a scathing denouncement of the upcoming referendum and urged Venezuelans living here to support U.S. politicians who oppose Chávez.

Paván, the UM student, is more engaged in local politics these days.

"That is something that affects my day-to-day life and where I don't feel disenfranchised," said Paván, a naturalized U.S. citizen. "But I hope one day to be able to have a life and a business in Caracas. I'm still hopeful."