

The youth of Venezuela rise up

Student protests against a Dec. 2 referendum reveal that the mantle of 'the left' is up for grabs.

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A Dec. 2 referendum in Venezuela that would grant extreme powers to Hugo Chávez isn't going as the budding dictator planned. Youth are protesting and the poor have doubts. Just who is the "left" in Venezuela is now up for grabs.

By hook or crook, President Chávez may yet win this referendum, which proposes 69 amendments to the Constitution. The most worrisome one would remove limits on his reelection – for life. Others would allow him to take private property in an "emergency" and give him direct power over the nation's foreign currency reserves. Media and human rights groups could also be restrained. (See related story.)

All this is part of Chávez's "revolution" for "21st-century socialism," only the revolution is faltering as the poor face increasing food shortages in an oil-rich country.

To win votes for his draconian steps, Chávez has included amendments that would, among other things, reduce the workday from eight to six hours and expand social benefits. These, of course, have immediate appeal to the majority of Venezuela's population who are poor. But guess who sees through this latest populist power play: Left-leaning students on university campuses.

They've been leading nonviolent marches by the tens of thousands since October, which may be one reason polls show the plebiscite vote could be close. Student leaders say this former military coup-plotter is merely using his current domination of Congress, the state oil company, media, courts, and election authority as a way to gain even more power. They fail to see the egalitarian nature of the revolution, especially when government price controls have reduced the supply of such staples as milk.

Student protests in Latin America are often a precursor to a leader's downfall. In the current protests for a "no" vote on the Venezuela referendum, students have found support from the Catholic Church, many political allies of Chávez, and his former mentor in the military, former Defense Minister Raúl Isaías Baduel.

Their voices keep alive the hope that the poor will see their future in democracy and not the paternalistic visions of a man who brooks little opposition.

Other leaders in Latin America are challenging Chávez, who tries to use oil wealth to win over leftists in other nations, including the US. "You cannot mistreat the continent, set it on fire as you do, speaking about imperialism when you, on the basis of your budget, want to set up an empire," said Colombia's president, Alvaro Uribe, this month. And Chávez's antics in public forums, too, have hurt his cause.

Like many other impatient revolutionaries such as Pol Pot in Cambodia, Chávez wants results in a hurry. He has given a new slogan to the military: "Fatherland, Socialism or Death." It is that reliance on the military and organized thugs to get his way that so upsets leftist students.

Other leftist leaders in the region, such as Brazil's president, Luiz Inácio 'Lula' da Silva, work within an open and fair democracy to uplift the poor. Such democracies may be slow in yielding benefits, but the alternatives, such as Chávez's rush to absolute rule, have been proven to be worse.

Like the fairy-tale child who saw the emperor has no clothes, the youth of Venezuela are seeing the Chávez reign for what it is.