

Chavez vows referendum 'cannot fail'

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CARACAS, Venezuela --

Rallies for and against constitutional changes proposed by President Hugo Chavez surged Tuesday as the Venezuelan leader declared that a weekend referendum on the proposed charter "cannot fail."

Such gatherings have increased tensions ahead of Sunday's referendum on reforms that would allow Chavez indefinite re-election, increase presidential terms from six to seven years and help the Venezuelan leader establish socialism in Venezuela.

While Chavez appeared before supporters to urge Venezuelans to approve the referendum and "open the path to a new nation," opponents held at least two protests and one of his ex-wives even held a press conference to urge voters to reject the slate of changes.

In Caracas, about 300 placard-waving students gathered outside the Catholic University Andres Bello, occupying a highway for four hours and causing rush-hour traffic jams, to urge Venezuelans to vote "no" on Sunday. The students contend the new constitution would give Chavez authoritarian powers.

"We students will keep coming out onto the street to demand freedom and democracy," said Roberto Diaz, a 21-year old law student at the university. Dozens of police and national guard monitored the demonstration that ended Tuesday evening without incident.

At the same time, about 5,000 mainly female Chavez supporters gathered in a stadium west of Caracas to back the referendum campaign. Participants in the "Women for Yes" rally, many dressed in Chavista red, waved posters with images of Chavez and Cuban leader Fidel Castro.

"The women in this process have much to gain and nothing to lose," said Chavez supporter Luzbelia Marin. "After Dec. 2, the Magna Carta will incorporate equality between men and women in the different electoral processes and policies."

In Puerto La Cruz, 150 miles east of Caracas, at least 300 students protesting the referendum clashed with Chavez supporters outside the private Santa Maria University, police said. Some Chavez supporters appeared to have guns, an officer said.

"They are hitting each other and there have been gunshots. Police are trying to calm down those involved," police officer Alexander Gonzalez said by telephone from Puerto La Cruz. "We have no reports of injuries, but we know that there has been a confrontation."

On Monday, a man was shot to death after he tried to cross a protest near the city of Valencia. Chavez blamed violent elements within the opposition for the killing.

Students have been one of the major sources of opposition to Chavez's referendum.

But some of the sharpest criticism of the constitutional changes Tuesday came from one of Chavez's two ex-wives, who compared approving the referendum to a "leap into the dark."

Maria Isabel Rodriguez, a journalist, urged government opponents to go to the polls to prevent possible fraud in Sunday's vote.

"It will be more difficult for fraud to take place if we all vote," said Rodriguez, who divorced Chavez in 2004.

In a speech Tuesday, Chavez said Venezuelans will vote "yes."

"On Saturday, the final attack begins, and Sunday ... it's written: the people will vote and will say 'yes' to the call we're giving to open the path to a new nation," Chavez said, alluding to the referendum that aims to modify 69 of the 530 articles in the constitution.

"We can't go backward, we cannot fail! We're obliged to win, to continue triumphing. This is a battle of world proportions," Chavez said.

Still, according to recent polls, the "no" could give Chavez his first defeat at the polls since he first won office in 1998.