

Chávez Bluster Surges Ahead of Referendum

Some Observers Link Talk to Tight Contest

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CARACAS, [Venezuela](#), Nov. 30 -- On the eve of a referendum that President [Hugo Chávez](#) has cast as a plebiscite on his rule, the populist leader is escalating his verbal assaults on foes real and imagined, picking a fight with neighboring [Colombia](#) one day and assailing Catholic Church leaders as "mental retards" the next.

Chávez's behavior appears increasingly unpredictable, but some political analysts say the bluster may be a tactic designed to generate support for the constitutional changes that Venezuelans will vote on in Sunday's referendum. Although a few weeks ago the proposals had been expected to receive easy approval, polls released last week showed that the opposition could ultimately prevail in a tight contest.

"He's decided that his best tactic to recover the control of his movement is to instill fear in his people that there's a world conspiracy against [Venezuela](#)," said Demetrio Boersner, a political analyst and former diplomat. "It's a tactic that uses histrionics as a weapon to unite the people so they vote for him on Sunday."

The government says the rhetoric is no scare tactic, but rather a response to concerns that a destabilization plan is in the works. Officials point to negative press coverage, coupled with the Bush administration's statements questioning the fairness of the vote.

"There's an offensive to criminalize [Venezuela](#), to say that Venezuela is falling into an abyss, that it's a country of dictators, of Castro-style communism, a country that helps terrorists," [Bernardo Alvarez](#), Venezuela's ambassador in Washington, said Friday in a phone interview.

This week Chávez accused [CNN](#) of instigating an assassination attempt, asserted that the church is fomenting dissent and called the president of neighboring Colombia a "liar" who couldn't be trusted. He didn't forget the United States, either, saying the CIA was busy hatching a plan to stir tumult.

In speech after speech, Chávez avoids dwelling on unpopular proposals for change, including one that would permit him to run for office indefinitely and another that would give him the power to appoint provincial governors. Instead, he depicts his opponents as conspirators out to crush his self-styled revolution. He vows to thwart any coup attempts, like one in 2002 that briefly ousted him and had Washington's tacit support.

"The revolution is peaceful, but it's not unarmed," he warned his foes on state television. "There's an army. There's a navy. There's an air force. There's a national guard. There's soldiers, there's cadets and the people. Don't consider it, because you'll repent."

He then added: "If you launch an offensive, I will launch a counterattack."

The harangues are a staple of Chávez's government, which in its nine years has transformed Venezuela's social and political model by ousting the elites who once ruled and providing widespread programs for the poor. Those programs have given Chávez solid, sometimes overwhelming support.

But some analysts say the particularly bellicose behavior of recent days may be working against Chávez.

Mark Feierstein, an American who has polled in Venezuela for years, said the president's supporters, known as Chavistas, also tire of the rhetoric.

"Venezuela is one of the most polarized countries in the world, and it really pains people when they see him reinforcing that," Feierstein said. "When we'd do focus groups with Chavistas, they would talk in mostly positive tones about Chávez, but the one thing that would bother them is CChávez's belligerence."

The president's behavior has been making international headlines since early this month when, at a summit in [Chile](#), he called former Spanish prime minister José María Aznar a "fascist." After a long diatribe by Chávez, the king of [Spain](#), Juan Carlos, became so agitated that he leaned across a table and said to the Venezuelan: "Why don't you shut up?"

Chávez has not paid heed. He also hasn't forgotten -- or forgiven. He later declared that relations with Spain, a major investor in Venezuela, would be "frozen" until the king apologized. The king has yet to do so.

"There will not be a million kings who will want to keep my mouth shut, because I speak in the name of Venezuela," Chávez later said.

Then, after [President Álvaro Uribe](#) of Colombia last week ended CChávez's role in mediations with that country's guerrilla group, Chávez said that Uribe's actions were "brutal" and disrespectful of Venezuela -- even if Chávez had sidestepped diplomatic protocol, as Uribe contended.

Chávez withdrew his ambassador from [Bogota](#) and, in televised comments Wednesday, said Uribe was capable of "barefaced lies." "If he does that to me," Chávez said, "imagine how he is with the poor Colombian people."

In the closing days of campaigning for the referendum, with the government holding huge rallies, officials have continued to warn of anti-Chávez plots that could originate in the church or the business community.

Indeed, the authorities said they were going to investigate church leaders as well as CNN, which came under criticism after placing a caption reading, "Who Killed Him?" on a photograph of Chávez. The network said the caption was an error, designed for a story about the investigation into the murder of [Washington Redskins](#) player [Sean Taylor](#).

On Friday, a day when an estimated 200,000 people in [Caracas](#) rallied in support of Chávez, officials saw yet one more possible sign of conspiracy. Toilet paper is in short supply -- as are milk, eggs and other staples.

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"We know there are sectors hiding toilet paper," Finance Minister Rodrigo Cabezas said on state television. "A group of business leaders are playing mean, playing dirty." He said it was designed to "create the sensation of product shortage during the election."