

# Loss not all bad for Venezuela's Chavez

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CARACAS, Venezuela --

In gracefully accepting his first electoral defeat, Hugo Chavez is casting himself as a true democrat and deflecting charges of despotism from Washington and critics at home.

But the Venezuelan president is not pulling back from his socialist agenda, and his opponents - for now - have neither the cohesion nor the clout to stop him.

Chavez narrowly lost a constitutional referendum Sunday that would have enabled him to remain in power for life and drive changes throughout Venezuelan society.

Some leaders might react to such a setback by toning down their rhetoric and adopting a more moderate approach to woo their citizens. Not Chavez.

"I want you all to know I'm not withdrawing a single comma of this proposal," a sober and introspective Chavez said early Monday as he conceded defeat. "I will continue making this proposal to the Venezuelan people. The proposal is still alive."

Even without the constitutional overhaul he had hoped for, Chavez already has far-reaching authority to single-handedly reshape the government, the economy and society.

He wields special powers granted by the National Assembly this year to enact laws by decree in areas from the economy to the justice system.

Those powers, which remain in effect until mid-2008, could enable Chavez to restructure state institutions, raise taxes on the rich and adapt existing legislation to share Venezuela's oil wealth more equitably in what he calls "21st century socialism."

Though a pragmatist at times, Chavez's conflict-prone, larger-than-life personality leaves little room for compromise, ensuring more friction in a country now deeply polarized by his vision of a socialist utopia.

Chavez said perhaps the country was not yet ready for the revisions he proposed.

"Did Hugo Chavez choose the wrong timing? It could be. It could be that we aren't mature enough," Chavez told state television Monday night. "Before searching for guilty ones, I have to say that I could have made a mistake in my selection of a time to make the proposal."

Chavez blamed his loss on low turnout among his supporters, even as many poor and working class Venezuelans continue to see their leader as a savior.

"He's a man who doesn't want to see his people suffer," said Carlos Orlando Vega, 47, who received his home from Chavez's government.

But others who previously backed Chavez were less forgiving of rampant crime, corruption and shortages of basic supplies such as milk.

And some feared the implications of the 69 proposed constitutional changes, which included indefinite decree power for the president to make changes in the economy, new forms of communal property and the ability to detain citizens without charge during states of emergency.

"I refuse to be part of a communist regime," said Cecilia Goldberger, a 56-year-old housewife.

A narrow victory could have opened Chavez to accusations of forcing reforms on a dissenting public. Chavez acknowledged as much, saying: "I wouldn't have wanted that Pyrrhic victory."

But the reforms mainly would have given constitutional legitimacy to changes that Chavez is pushing through anyway. For example, one change would have let the government occupy property it plans to expropriate even before a court rules. Chavez's government already has done this in some cases, seizing buildings and land.

Since the opposition boycotted 2005 elections, the National Assembly has been filled almost entirely with Chavez-allied lawmakers. Pro-Chavez governors and mayors have seen their fortunes rise, and the opposition accuses Chavez's supporters of loading the courts with biased judges.

But Sunday's victory has energized the opposition. And opponents still has some ways of holding Chavez accountable, including private news media and the possibility of petitioning for a recall referendum once Chavez reaches the midpoint of his six-year term in December 2009.

With his constitutional overhaul defeated, Chavez now has to step down in 2013. But if anything characterizes him, it is his staying power.

The 53-year-old former army lieutenant colonel told supporters before the vote he would stay in office as long as they wanted - and perhaps "until the last bone of my skeleton dries up."

Like most of Chavez's aims, it is a grand vision he may not easily relinquish.