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## Tensions Grow Between Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, Congress

by LADB Staff

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Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's conflicts with Congress and the Supreme Court have fed charges that the president is a threat to the nation's democracy. Despite widespread public support, Chavez has not only clashed with the political elite, but with workers and the landless. On April 9, Chavez said if Congress did not pass legislation giving him broad powers to act on economic issues, he will likely declare a state of emergency. Chavez says the powers are necessary to deal with Venezuela's serious economic problems and get the economy back on track.

Congressional leaders responded by appealing to the Organization of American States (OAS) to safeguard Venezuelan democracy. "Chavez's attitude is not only against political parties but against the democratic system that defends the balance of power," Sen. Timoteo Zambrano of the AD wrote in a letter to the OAS and other international organizations. "Whether I decree a state of economic emergency will depend on Congress' response in the coming days," Chavez said. "I hope not to have to do it."

The Venezuelan Constitution empowers the president to declare a state of emergency during "internal or external conflicts," allowing him, among other things, to suspend constitutional guarantees and rule by decree when "critical circumstances threaten economic or social life." Chavez rejects bill approved by Congress Congress had passed the Ley Habilitante (Enabling Law) March 27, giving Chavez special powers to make economic reforms. But Chavez returned it to Congress, saying it did not go far enough. Chavez said the measures approved by Congress were "restrictive and insufficient" to confront the "very serious" national crisis. "It would be terrible for us to accept this enabling law, which is a straitjacket, a law that really disables," said Chavez, adding that Congress "rejected or adulterated" 68% of the powers he requested.

Chavez has asked for authorization to reform the social security system and the tax code, renegotiate the foreign debt, draw up an investor-protection law, restructure state spending and the budget, and promote investment in the oil industry. Although recent polls show public support for Chavez at 90%, that could change if he is unable to turn the economy around.

Venezuela's current economic crisis is caused in part by a drop in world prices for oil, the country's main export. The budget deficit is estimated at US\$8 billion, and hundreds of businesses have gone bankrupt, raising unemployment. Federico Ramirez Leon, head of the Confederacion de Trabajadores de Venezuela (CTV), said layoffs have cost 50,000 workers their jobs in the first two months of this year. "Never has the country registered the present levels of unemployment," which is more than 17%, he said.

Chavez's economic plan calls for a 20% raise in salaries for state workers, but unions want a 30% raise for both public and private employees. Business leaders say even a 20% raise for private

workers is out of the question. "The issue of salaries could undo the political platform of President Chavez," said sociologist Roland Diaz.

### *Landless increase takeovers*

Since Chavez took office Feb 2, takeovers of land and housing, not uncommon in Venezuela, have increased even more than is usual during transition periods. Tens of thousands of Venezuelans have occupied small portions of rural estates, built new shantytowns on public land, and taken over buildings in half of the country's 24 states. Analysts say the occupations are organized by local groups rather than by the government or opposition forces and evidently do not indicate the emergence of an organized, nationwide "landless" movement, like Brazil's Movimento Sem- Terra (MST).

Chavez, who campaigned for changes in favor of the 80% of Venezuelans now living below the poverty line, has urged understanding toward the squatters, and said he would not send in the National Guard to remove them. "As long as I am president, the armed forces are not going to use their guns to repress campesinos or students who demonstrate," said Chavez. "I am not going to throw stones at the people who put me here, I would rather have the people throw stones at me."

Critics say Chavez's statements have encouraged the takeovers, despite the president's call to squatters to "stop the takeovers and return occupied property." Foreign Minister Jose Vicente Rangel said that "the occupation of land is a passing problem, but repressing it, especially with the National Guard, would be like pouring fuel on the fire." Analysts warn Constituent Assembly is not silver bullet Chavez says his proposal to rewrite the Constitution to be voted on in a referendum April 25 will go a long way toward improving economic conditions.

Respected 93-year-old author Arturo Uslar Pietri said recently that Venezuela is going through the worst political and economic crisis in its history, but the executive's confrontations with the other branches of power and various social sectors are preventing it from solving the problems.

Uslar Pietri said many Venezuelans see a Constituent Assembly as a "magic solution" to solve the national problems. The people responsible for this disaster "are we Venezuelans and as long as we don't identify our mistakes and what we need to do, we are not going to get out of the hole," he said. "We must leave behind the traditional themes of political demagogy and confront our real problems because the country that lived off of oil revenue no longer exists."

Despite Chavez's overwhelming popularity, he has come in for widespread criticism, particularly regarding what many see as a tendency toward authoritarianism. He clashed with the Supreme Court the day he took office when he issued the decree to hold the referendum on a Constituent Assembly. On March 18, the Supreme Court ruled that Chavez's decree was invalid because one question asked Venezuelans to give the president the right to decide how the members of the assembly would be chosen.

Although Chavez agreed to rewrite the question to meet court objections, he continues to refer to the power of a Constituent Assembly to dissolve Congress and the Supreme Court. On April 13, the Supreme Court ruled that a Constituent Assembly's powers do not include dissolving the other

branches of government. Chavez replied that once installed the assembly could do whatever it wants. "I agree that the Constituent Assembly should dissolve Congress to elect another, legitimate one through other methods," said Chavez. "And I add to my convictions that it should also dissolve the Supreme Court of Justice."

If approved, a Constituent Assembly would be installed July 5 and would be expected to finish in January 2000. Opposition charges that a coup is possible. On April 11, Chavez said Cabinet ministers would not appear before Congress to answer questions about the Ley Habilitante. In response, Accion Democratica (AD) leader Carlos Canache Matae told the daily newspaper El Observador that the country is "on the verge of a coup," and Chavez's "serious attacks" on Congress and the Supreme Court threaten democracy.

Henrique Salas Romer, Chavez's opponent in the election, has also expressed concern for the future of democracy. In Venezuela, only the military, the church, and communications media have any credibility with the public, he said in Miami on April 6. Salas Romer said the country suffers from "a tremendous, a gigantic institutional void, where people do not believe in the political parties, and the Venezuelan party system that existed for 40 years has virtually disappeared." [Sources: Inter Press Service, 03/19/99; Spanish news service EFE, 03/18/99, 04/06/99, 04/08/99; Notimex, 03/19/99, 04/08/99; CNN, Reuters, 04/08/99; The Miami Herald, 04/09/99; The New York Times, 04/10/99; Associated Press, 03/19/99, 04/07/99, 04/08/99, 04/12/99; United Press International, 04/12/99]

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