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LADB Staff

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by LADB Staff  
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In August, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez presented the Asamblea Nacional (AN) with a proposal for constitutional reform, the most prominent piece of which would eliminate term limits on presidential re-election. Although opposition groups rejected the proposal, the AN is completely controlled by Chavistas after opposition groups boycotted the last legislative election (see NotiSur, 2005-12-16).

During the last presidential election, Chavez announced that he would be seeking reforms that would potentially allow him to govern until the year 2031, promising a popular referendum on the move if opposition forces boycotted. Opposition rejects proposal but lacks parliamentary voice This constitutional reform is the latest in a number of changes made under the Chavez administration (see NotiSur, 1999-11-19, 1999-12-24, 2000-11-10 and 2001-02-09).

Chavez has stressed the importance of the "Bolivarian" Constitution and ordered mass printings and distribution of the document so that all the people would have access to it. AN president Cilia Flores said Chavez's proposed changes, including lifting presidential term limits, were approved by all 167 lawmakers after about six hours of debate on Aug. 22. Final approval is expected within two or three months, and voters will then decide whether to approve the changes in the referendum.

The reforms, if approved, would extend presidential terms from six to seven years and allow Chavez to run again in 2013. Current presidential term limits prevent him from seeking re-election to a third term in 2012. Government opponents have attacked the reforms, saying they will weaken democracy by permitting Chavez to become a lifelong leader like his ally Cuban President Fidel Castro. Chavez says the changes will give Venezuelans greater decision-making power and aid the transfer of billions of dollars from Venezuela's foreign reserves into social programs.

Ismael Garcia, one of the AN's few dissenting voices, criticized pro-Chavez lawmakers for excluding opposition groups from the discussion, arguing that Venezuelans of all political leanings must be included in the debate before the proposed reforms are put to a national vote. Garcia, who voted for the initial approval despite his criticism, said issues "such as the economic path of a new society" must be discussed. "This isn't just any debate," he said.

Earlier on Aug. 22, former Chavez mentor Luis Miquilena urged Venezuelans to reject the proposed constitutional changes. Miquilena, who headed a democratically elected, pro-Chavez legislature that drafted Venezuela's existing Constitution, called his former ally's new reform proposal "a constitutional fraud" aimed at giving him "perpetual power." Miquilena, an 88-year-old former labor leader, once was referred to as Chavez's closest adviser. But he quit the Cabinet in 2002 and has periodically criticized the president since then.
Chavez predicted the proposal would bring renewed political upheaval to Venezuela. He says the Constitution must be redrafted to steer Venezuela away from capitalism. He predicted that most people would support his proposal, but he also forecast the beginning of a tenacious political battle with the nation's opposition.

"I have faith that we are going to convince the immense majority of Venezuelans of the necessity and the immediate benefits that this is going to bring the country," Chavez said during a televised interview. "Tomorrow our great battle begins," Chavez said on Aug. 15, prior to sending the reform to the AN. "They are going to launch a campaign tomorrow to try to distort the text and the spirit of the proposal."

Dozens of government supporters wearing red the color of Chavez's ruling party started gathering early outside the AN, where sound trucks and giant video screens were set up in preparation for the president's public address. A recently nationalized telecommunications company (see NotiSur, 2007-05-18) sent text messages to mobile-phone clients inviting them to the event. Many lawmakers say they support eliminating presidential term limits, but they argue the same rules should not apply to state governors and mayors.

Roman Catholic leaders have been among the most outspoken critics of Chavez's plans to rewrite the Constitution, and the Conferencia Episcopal Venezolana (CEV) has complained that his reform proposals were drafted without public involvement. Others argue Chavez has dangerously divided Venezuela along class lines. "The majority of Venezuelans don't want socialism. [Chavez] wants our country to be like Cuba, and we aren't going to accept that," said Linda Dos Santos, a 30-year-old shoe-store owner who fears the government could move to seize second homes and distribute them among the poor under the pending reform.

Angel Angulo, a former horse-racing jockey who works for the Foreign Ministry, denied the wealthy would be targeted by the government as Chavez moves to bridge the gap between the rich and poor. "Socialism will bring benefits to those who need it the most, but all of us can live together," said Angulo, adding that Venezuela's opposition leaders oppose indefinite re-election "because they don't have any chance of being elected in forthcoming elections."

**Reforms: cooperatives, community councils, popular militia**

Other proposed reforms would create new types of property to be managed by cooperatives, give neighborhood-based "communal councils" administrative responsibilities usually reserved for elected officials, and create a "popular militia" that would form part of the military. The workday would also be reduced to six hours. Flores said government-friendly lawmakers have the right to approve the reforms without changing the proposal that Chavez presented. "We are not imposing anything," she told state television.

Chavez also urged lawmakers to increase the government's power to expropriate private property before getting a court's approval to remove obstacles to his plans to redistribute "unproductive" farming lands to the poor and open the way for cooperatives to manage failing factories. The president's supporters say the reforms will help the poor by bolstering initiatives from free adult education to communal councils that give citizens increased participation in community planning.
The president also wants the central government to have greater control over local governments, and his proposal would end the autonomy of Venezuela's Central Bank potentially funneling billions of dollars in foreign reserves into social programs. Chavez called for a transition to "a new society" that would lift millions in the oil-rich nation out of poverty. He said the constitutional changes are necessary so that capitalism in Venezuela "finishes dying" to allow his socialist revolution to flourish.

But critics say the changes would let Chavez tighten government control of the economy in the Western Hemisphere's largest oil exporter and allow him to be re-elected indefinitely. "Why doesn't he leave the legislative technicalities aside," Teodoro Petkoff, editor of the opposition-sided Tal Cual newspaper, wrote in an editorial Aug. 16, "and propose, once and for all, a one-line article reading: 'Hugo Chavez will be president however long he wants.'"

Left-wing analysts and pro-Chavez writers frequently criticize the first-world press for not focusing on the administration's efforts to build a more participatory democracy through mechanisms like the community councils, called Bolivarian circles, wealth redistribution, and literacy drives. In the Internet publication venezuelaanalysis.com, writer Chuck Kaufman attacked The Washington Post for telling a "big lie" to undermine what he calls the democratic process Venezuela is undergoing.

After reviewing a Washington Post editorial that calls Chavez an autocrat, Kaufman concludes, "Apparently they believe their readers cannot recognize logical fallacies if they string enough of them together and repeat them often enough."

Manuel Rosales leads opposition to change Chavez opponents vowed on Aug. 16 to block his plans to radically overhaul the Constitution. "We will go from town to town to mobilize the people to confront this attempted constitutional coup," said Manuel Rosales, the leader of Venezuela's largest opposition party who lost to Chavez in the last presidential election. "A constitutional reform isn't necessary. What the people want is for this Constitution to be obeyed."

Other figures like Julio Borges of conservative opposition party Primero Justicia (PJ) join Rosales in rejecting the reforms. Government foes said they would mount a nationwide campaign to oppose the reform a daunting task in a country that re-elected Chavez to the presidency by a wide margin last December (see NotiSur, 2006-12-15 and 2007-01-26). Chavez denied he wanted to be president for life. "If someone says this is a project to entrench myself in power, no, it's only a possibility, a possibility that depends on many variables," he said.

A member of the Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE), Vicente Diaz, said that Chavez needed to hold an Asamblea Constituyente to conduct the reforms properly, since the reforms "touch fundamental aspects" of the constitutional text and proposes creating a "socialist state."

Diaz is one of five members of the CNE, which directs elections and is charged with preparing the referendum to approve the changes once the AN approves them. "If the fundamental principles are touched on, the path is no longer a constitutional reform, but rather a Constituent Assembly," said Diaz to local media.
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