

# Hugo Chávez and Constitutional Reform

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The constitutional reform project introduced by the Venezuelan President on August 15, 2007 has provoked an unprecedented media frenzy. For several days the western media obsessively focused on this, after all, banal event. The proposal seeks to modify 33 of the 350 articles of the 1999 Constitution. (1) But the media only concentrated on the proposed change to Article 230 that would repeal the limit on presidential terms currently set at two terms. (2) The French press, among others, immediately denounced Chávez' intention to "remain in power" (3) and criticized the Venezuelan president's "temptation of total power" claiming he aimed to "become the sacrosanct leader." (4)

It is both curious and ironic that the French press feign to be offended by Chávez' attempt at a third term when presidential term limits are not constitutionally limited in France. According to the French Magna Carta, President Nicolas Sarkozy could go on governing for the next 30 years, if reelected, without any problem. The same goes for countries such as United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Portugal, and most other European nations. This fact has never aroused the slightest critique from the western media. Why is it that what is acceptable in the West is not acceptable for Third World nations? These attacks reek of inadmissible colonialism and clearly illustrate the intention of the transnational press to demonize the democratic and popular government of President Chávez at whatever cost.

In fact, the completely legal Venezuelan reform will not be adopted by decree. First it must be extensively debated throughout the country. Then it has to be approved by 167 National Assembly deputies. And lastly, it has to be submitted to public referendum. (5) In sum, the people have the last word. A reform could not be more democratic. Moreover, the current constitution allows the opposition to participate in the debate and formulate concrete proposals. (6) But that is of little interest to the detractors of Hugo Chávez, who have launched a worldwide disinformation campaign with the complicity of the western media, the White House and the European Union. (7)

The opposition has sworn to block the constitutional reform by any means claiming that it poses a threat to democracy. Opposition leader Manuel Rosales, who participated in the coup attempt of April 2002, denounced the "constitutional coup" and announced that he would oppose the reform project. (8)

For his part, Hugo Chávez called on the people to resist the media propaganda and proliferate national and local debates regarding the project (9). He also warned against destabilization attempts orchestrated by the opposition, who was responsible for the bloody coup attempt and the subsequent disastrous sabotage of the oil industry in December 2002. "The conspiracies have already begun [...]. Until late last night I met with the minister of the People's Power for Defense, members of the military high command, the commanders of the Army, National Guard, and the Navy; evaluating, because messages have already begun to

circulate and arrive at the barracks, [...]. The hand of the CIA is behind it," Chávez accused. (11)

In closing he reiterated his conviction that the opposition would be "crushed and pulverized" during the upcoming consultative referendum on the Constitutional Reform Project. (12) A new triumph for the most popular man in Latin America is very probable, given that he has won 12 consecutive electoral victories since his presidential election in 1998. The National Assembly will decide on the reform in November 2007 after three months of discussions and debates. (13) The referendum will be convoked within 30 days of the project's approval. (14)

It is worth mentioning that the media, so long-winded about this matter, have hardly mentioned the rest of the proposed reforms. In addition to annulling presidential terms limits and extending the duration of terms from six years to seven, the project also proposes to establish a "social stability fund" that would guarantee workers "fundamental rights such as retirement, pensions, vacations, prenatal and postnatal leave and other others..." (15) The workday would be limited to six hours creating a 36-hour workweek and employers would be prohibited from forcing wage earners to work overtime. "The exploitation of workers" would become unacceptable. (16)

The reforms would also abolish the autonomy of the Central Bank thus allowing subsidies to be applied to social programs. In addition, communal councils that play a direct role in decision-making would be multiplied in order to promote a more participatory democracy. New forms of ownership with a cooperative character would be created, without eradicating private property. Land currently not in production would be distributed among rural farmers. Similarly, the reform would write "the express interdiction of large estates" into the constitution as well as the prohibition of all monopolies. "The state reserves [the rights to], for reasons of national sovereignty, development and interests, the exploitation of liquid, solid and gaseous hydrocarbons." Likewise, it would make impossible the privatization of the nation's natural resources. (17) the media has censored all these reforms.

"This ambition to accumulate money and wealth is one of the causes of the downfall of humanity," declared Chávez, who stated his intention to build a more just society. (18) So far, from his position of power, the Venezuelan president has carried out spectacular social reforms that have greatly improved Venezuelan living standards. After recovering control of the national petroleum company PDVSA and nationalizing the petroleum, electricity and telephone sectors, eradicating illiteracy in 2005, distributing 3 million hectares of land to rural farmers, universalizing education and health care, and conducting nearly 200 thousand surgeries for cataracts and other ocular diseases free of charge, he built housing en masse for the most needy, subsidized basic food stuffs by 40%, raised the minimum wage making it the highest in Latin America (\$286USD/month), and decreased the work week from 44 hours to 36. No other government in the world has done so much in so little time. (19)

Hugo Chávez has extended his aid to the other American nations. "Brazilian workers have recovered their jobs, Nicaraguan farmers received credits and Bolivian mayors can build health clinics all thanks to Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez," reported the Associated Press.(YOU SHOULD DEFINITELY ADD A CITATION HERE) Currently Venezuela offers direct financial support to the American continent. In 2007, Chávez has so far provided no less than \$8,8 billion in fuel donations, financing and aid, in contrast to the \$3 billion that has come from the Bush administration. The Bolivarian government's aid is unprecedented in Latin American history, with the exception of Cuba's humanitarian missions. Even U.S.

citizens, abandoned by their own government, have receiving subsidized fuel thanks to Venezuela's altruistic policy. (20)

So it is of little surprise that the Venezuelan president has become the most popular leader in the world. Advocating the emancipation of those constantly humbled by an unsustainable economic order, Chávez has sparked hope not only in his own people, who are now inexorable actors in establishing the trajectory of their country; but he is also a source of inspiration for the dispossessed around the globe. Conversely, to the rulers of the world, Hugo Chávez is a dangerous example. He is a leader who refuses their tutelage and calls into question their devastating hegemony. In retaliation they strive to discredit him by any means possible with the cowardly complicity of the western media that, tossing journalistic ethics out the window, does not hesitate in the least to manipulate reality and excel in the realm of disinformation.

*Translation by Dawn Gable.*

[Article in French](#), 30 of August, 2007.

#### Notes

- (1) Hugo Chávez Frías, "Presentación del proyecto de Reforma Constitucional ante la Asamblea Nacional, por parte del presidente Hugo Chávez," Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias, 15 August, 2007.
- (2) Le Monde, "Au Venezuela, Hugo Chávez présente sa réforme constitutionnelle," 16 August, 2007.
- (3) Libération, "Hugo Chávez veut modifier la Constitution pour rester au pouvoir," 16 August, 2007.
- (4) Stéphanie Schüller, "Chávez - la tentation du pouvoir total ," Radio France International, 16 August, 2007.
- (5) Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias, "Batallones socialistas crearán voluntariado para debatir reforma constitucional," 25 August, 2007.
- (6) Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias, "Chávez exhorta arreciar batalla ideológica para frenar campaña contra reforma," 26 August, 2007.
- (7) Christopher Toothaker, "Ex mentor de Chávez rechaza su reforma," Associated Press, 22 August, 2007.
- (8) Fabiola Sánchez, "Opositores a Chávez lucharán contra reforma constitucional," Associated Press, 17 August, 2007.
- (9) Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias, "Carta Magna garantiza a la oposición hacer propuestas sobre reforma ante la AN," 25 August, 2007.
- (10) Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias, "Reforma constitucional profundizará la Revolución Bolivariana," 25 de agosto 2007; Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias, "Chávez denuncia que comenzó conspiración contra Reforma Constitucional," 19 August, 2007.

(11) The Associated Press, "Chávez acusa a opositores de conspirar en su contra," 20 August, 2007.

(12) Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias, "Oposición será aplastada en próximo referendo sobre la reforma," 25 August, 2007.

(13) The Associated Press, "Congreso venezolano espera aprobar pronto reforma constitucional," 23 de August, 2007; Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias, "Todos los sectores del país analizarán Proyecto de Reforma Constitucional," 23 August, 2007.

(14) Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias, "CNE convocará a referendo tras aprobación del proyecto por la Asamblea Nacional," 23 August, 2007; Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias, "CNE trabaja en el diseño del referendo constitucional," 22 August, 2007.

(15) Hugo Chávez Frías, " Presentación del proyecto de Reforma Constitucional ante la Asamblea Nacional, por parte del presidente Hugo Chávez," op. cit.; Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias, "Gobierno nacional trabaja en reivindicación del derecho a la pensión," 22 August, 2007; Pascual Serrano, "El golpe de Estado de Chávez," Rebelión, 17 August, 2007.

(16) Hugo Chávez Frías, " Presentación del proyecto de Reforma Constitucional ante la Asamblea Nacional, por parte del presidente Hugo Chávez," op. cit.; Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias, "Rivero: Nueva jornada laboral planteará horarios de mutuo acuerdo," 22 August, 2007; Pascual Serrano, "El golpe de Estado de Chávez," op. cit.

(17) Ibid.

(18) Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias, "Chávez destacó moral socialista como base de nuevo modelo de país," 20 August, 2007.

(19) Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias, "Venezuela con el salario mínimo más alto de Latinoamérica," 20 de abril de 2007; Ignacio Ramonet, "Hugo Chávez," Le Monde Diplomatique, August, 2007, p. 1.

(20) Natalie Obiko Pearson & Ian James, "Exclusiva AP: Venezuela ofrece miles de millones a Latinoamérica," Associated Press, 26 August, 2007; The Associated Press, "Ayuda venezolana a Latinoamérica y el Caribe en el 2007," 26 August, 2007.

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