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## Slouching Toward Authoritarianism

By Michael Shifter

From *foreignaffairs.org*, November 7, 2007

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Summary: Shifter's update to his May/June 2006 essay "In Search of Hugo Chávez".

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Hugo Chávez--a self-described revolutionary presiding over the world's fifth-largest oil producer--has certainly not lacked for either grand plans or the resources to carry them out in his nine years as president of Venezuela. So far, he has also deftly deflected criticism and overcome opposition. With his newest initiatives, however, he may be overreaching--threatening to stall his project both domestically and internationally.

On the national front, Chávez is resolutely consolidating his autocratic governance model. The National Assembly overwhelmingly approved the articles for a constitutional reform that will be submitted to a national referendum on December 2. The 69 amendments cover private property, social security, central bank autonomy, the length of the workday, and much more. But the centerpiece of the overall package is a reform to allow the Venezuelan president--but no other office holders--to be reelected indefinitely. Other proposed changes would give Chávez instruments to further control the economy and suppress dissent.

There is little doubt that Chávez's December 2 referendum will pass. After polls showed around 60 percent of Venezuelans opposed the indefinite reelection proposition, Chávez quickly added sweeteners, such as reducing the workday from eight to six hours. The political opposition continues to be divided and ambivalent about whether to participate in what they see as a rigged system. It was a shortsighted 2005 legislative boycott by the opposition that left the national assembly filled with only Chávez supporters.

Still, Chávez's not-so-subtle push to be "president for life" has revealed one of the regime's real soft spots. Compounded by declining oil production, persistent corruption, skyrocketing crime rates, inflation, drug-trafficking, and continued infrastructure problems, these weaknesses have deepened fissures within the government coalition--and created openings for new opposition forces. In the National Assembly, the pro-Chávez Podemos party openly opposed the indefinite reelection measure. More significantly, student leaders--who emerged earlier this year when Chávez failed to renew the license for the RCTV station--have mobilized once again against Chávez's rush toward authoritarianism. These street demonstrations have highlighted Venezuela's sharp polarization (and led Chávez recently to hint that he may break the referendum into two or three blocks of amendments, which would be voted on independently).

Although Chávez is buoyed by soaring oil prices and President George W. Bush's continuing unpopularity, he has not been able to create a unified front to challenge Washington. To be sure, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran has made several visits to Latin America, at Chávez's invitation, to help overcome his international pariah status. Chávez's alternative projects, designed to challenge US-led free trade arrangements and international financial institutions, appear to be moving forward. The Latin American Bolivarian Trade Arrangement (ALBA) includes Bolivia, Nicaragua, Cuba and Ecuador, while the Bank of the South also has Brazil, Argentina, and Colombia as members. Chávez has even been authorized by Colombian president Álvaro Uribe to help mediate a hostage/prisoner swap with the FARC guerrillas, which will likely enhance Chávez's regional standing regardless of the outcome. As Chávez works to forge alliances and build support, Washington has been a strikingly marginal player in the region, disengaged and distracted by other global priorities. In Latin America's fluid political landscape, most regional leaders tend to indulge Chávez's regional initiatives, especially if they are backed by substantial resources. Pragmatism reigns.

But at the same time, it is clear that many presidents, such as Lula of Brazil, do not support Chávez's divisive politics or belligerent posture toward the United States. As a result of the RCTV case, Brazil's Senate has yet to clear the way for Venezuela to become a member of the South American trade group Mercosur. Argentina's newly elected President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner has been troubled by Chávez's alliance with Ahmadinejad, given allegations that Iran orchestrated the 1994 bombing of a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires that killed 85 people. Despite Uribe's participation in the Bank of the South and his support of

Chávez's role in a possible hostage deal, Colombia is unlikely to back a Venezuela-led regional coalition opposing the United States. It is by no means clear that even the South American governments most friendly to Chávez--Bolivia and Ecuador--are headed toward political consolidation. The constituent assembly process in Bolivia has been crippled while Ecuador's has yet to begin. Neither of those countries possesses Venezuela's oil wealth, and both have sharper ethnic and geographic cleavages.

True, Chávez's grandiose projects are buttressed by seductive rhetoric and record oil prices, but both within Venezuela and throughout the region there are signs of a growing reluctance to accept his outsized political ambitions.

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