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Venezuelans in Miami speak out as Chavez recall approaches

By VANESSA PETIT, Associated Press
August 9, 2004

MIAMI — On a recent weekend, hundreds of Venezuelans gathered at a suburban park to celebrate their nation's Independence Day. Their homeland's yellow, blue and red flag adorned T-shirts, bracelets, bandanas and food stands. The crowd enjoyed traditional Venezuelan music and food like arepas and cachapas.

But the event had more the feel of a political rally than a patriotic festival. Many attending had left Venezuela for South Florida because they opposed President Hugo Chavez's economic and political reforms. An emcee asked the crowd about Chavez.

"Fuera Chavez!" or "Chavez out," was the roar in response to enthusiastic applause.

Many of the same people hope to vote in the recall election against Chavez scheduled Aug. 15 in Venezuela. As many as 82,000 Venezuelans lived in Florida as of 2002, according to the most recent figures from the U.S. census, and the number has probably grown. Most of them live in South Florida.

"Chavez is going to lose and he is going to have to leave!" shouted Angel Cardenas, clapping his hands as the crowd chanted anti-Chavez slogans.

The Venezuelan Consulate in Miami said thousands of Venezuelans have registered to vote in the recall election. But restrictions announced in late July in Caracas could prevent many from voting. Venezuelans who want to vote must prove they are legally living in the country where they are voting and have a Venezuelan identification card.

Analia Maiorani, who said she left Caracas for Miami three years ago to find better job opportunities, had registered to vote. But she's not a legal resident and now will be unable to cast a ballot.

"This is just another one of Chavez's stunts to jeopardize the election," Maiorani said. "He will do anything to stay in power."

Venezuelans are deeply polarized between those who say Chavez is trying to install a Fidel Castro-style dictatorship and those who argue he's the first president to provide opportunities for the country's poor.

While many Venezuelans in South Florida are vocal in their opposition to Chavez, he is not without his supporters.

Small groups, dubbed Bolivarian Circles, in Florida and throughout the United States quietly back the president. The groups take their name from Simon Bolivar, the 19th century father of Venezuelan independence who transformed Spanish colonial outposts into independent states.



Yesikka Vivancos/AP

Angel Cardenas, left, speaks to a reporter regarding the upcoming elections in his home country of Venezuela while he enjoys the day at the Venezuelan Festival in Miami.

"The fact that few know of our existence does not mean that we do not exist. We are less boisterous than the anti-Chavez groups but we are organized," said Alexa Weber, a Venezuelan psychologist who runs the Bolivarian Circle in Fort Lauderdale, one of three in South Florida.

Weber and group members meet once a month to discuss Venezuelan current events. They show documentaries, watch Venezuelan news and share ideas. She has Americans in her group, Dominicans, Cubans and Venezuelans.

To form a Bolivarian Circle all that is needed, Weber explained, is more than seven people and all circles worldwide must register online with the Venezuelan government.

"In the circles, it is our goal to try to show Chavez for what he really is — a great democrat and defender of the Constitution," said Jesus Soto, who coordinates the pro-Chavez groups in South Florida.

The referendum marks the latest stage in an increasingly bitter campaign to unseat Chavez, who has already survived a coup, a two-month general strike and a previous attempt to force a vote on his leadership.

The country's richest business leaders, largest labor confederation, top military men and most of the news media have joined forces against Chavez. He maintains loyal support among the poor — his core constituency who see him as their savior. They are beneficiaries of billions he has spent on social welfare, educational programs and free health care clinics set throughout Venezuela's hillside slums.

If enough people vote next Sunday to remove Chavez, new presidential elections will follow in 30 days. The winner would then serve out the rest of Chavez's term until Feb. 2, 2007.

But many Venezuelans are skeptical about the election tally and how Chavez will guarantee a fair vote since he holds political control of key institutions such as the courts and the electoral council overseeing the recall.

"I believe that if Chavez loses the referendum he's going to have to resign the presidency, but will keep control of the government. All resources are on his side," said Beatrice Rangel, a former adviser to Venezuela's former President Carlos Andres Perez. Rangel is now an adviser to the chairman of the Cisneros Group of Companies, a privately held media conglomerate in Miami.

More importantly, Rangel said, is that a simple majority against Chavez is not enough to oust him — the opposition must exceed the number of votes that got him re-elected in July 2000, or more than 3.8 million.

Although there's considerable anti-Chavez sentiment, the opposition has no strong candidate to replace him, said Rangel,

Chavez, a former red beret paratrooper, led a botched coup in 1992 against Perez. The coup collapsed but Chavez became a cult hero denouncing the two-party system that had dominated Venezuela for decades.

In 1998 he won the presidency by a landslide. Chavez cast himself as an anti-imperialist. He supplies oil to Cuba at cut-rate prices while importing thousands of Cuban teachers, doctors and sports trainers. He renamed the country "the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela."

Rafael Adrianza, president of FundaVen, a Miami-based organization that gives legal advice to Venezuelan immigrants, said he's thankful for the referendum although he doubts that Chavez would leave without a fight.

"He has entangled Venezuela in a crazy 1960s communist revolution," Adrianza said. "They are depleting the country of monetary and invaluable human resources. But it must stop now."

Chavez supporter Soto leveled the same accusations against opponents.

"The opposition always says that Chavez is cheating or preparing to cheat but what they don't want to recognize is that Chavez respects democracy and the Venezuelan people," Soto said. When the country's constitution was rewritten in 1998, Chavez pushed for the recall as a tool to revoke presidential power if it was abused, Soto said.

While Chavez deeply divides many, some Venezuelans want the sides to put their politics aside and do what's best for the country after Sunday's recall vote.

During the Venezuelan Independence Day Festival in mid-July, Oneyda Polanco looked out into the crowd and shouted, "Viva Venezuela!"

"I just want what is best for the country," she said. "May God bless Venezuela on that important day."

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