

# Constitutional Reforms in Venezuela Foretell a Planning Revolution

by CLARA IRAZÁBAL

The National Assembly of Venezuela is discussing a proposal by President Hugo Chávez to change thirty-three of the 350 articles of the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. The proposed changes would create new forms of land tenure and restructure the nation's governance system, both of which are essential to urban planning. The proposal will be submitted to a national referendum in December. Given current popular support for the Chávez government, it is expected that the reform will be approved.

Chávez supporters see the reforms as a necessary step to deepen their "revolutionary process" toward a democratic "socialism of the twenty-first century." The changes attempt to address the obstacles posed by a corrupt and ineffective bureaucracy created largely as a result of the huge surplus from Venezuela's petroleum-dependent economy. The bureaucracy has often paralyzed and sabotaged the revolutionary process. The Venezuelan Bolivarian Revolution has often been criticized for both continuing the corrupt, bureaucratic status quo and consolidating state power in the hands of a single individual. While both these conditions exist, they do not account for the most significant element of the revolutionary process, what George Ciccariello-Maher calls "the explosion of communal power." Communal power is to be found in the dynamic community-based movements that make up the largest base of power for Chávez, including new "community councils" being formed in many neighborhoods. The constitutional reform seeks to consolidate and expand communal power, transform the bureaucracy and provide the president with more ways to maneuver around the obstacles to decentralization, devolution and socialization of the economy.

## New Forms of Land Tenure

The classification of property in the proposed reform leaves unchanged both the right to and protection of private property and the right of the government to take property for public purposes in exchange for adequate compensation (similar to provisions in the U.S. and Western Europe). Other forms of property would be established, however, including: public (fully owned and managed by the government); social (owned by the people and either managed by the government or by communities or other institutions); collective (owned and managed by groups of individuals for their particular uses); and mixed (a combination of ownership and management). The new classification of property is meant to support further diversification in the forms of social organization and economic activity.

## New Governance Structure

The constitutional reform would maintain preexisting political-territorial entities in the country and also create new maritime regions, insular districts, cities, communes, federal provinces, functional districts and special military regions. Within cities, *communes* would be units smaller than municipalities in which individuals and community organizations could engage more actively in governmental affairs. *Federal provinces* would help the national government funnel resources into less developed areas and integrate them into the regional and national development plans. The reform, then, proposes mechanisms to transfer resources and services from the upper levels of government to community and neighborhood organizations that request them, including in the areas of housing, culture, environment, political participation and economy. It is expected that the new geometry of power **(Continued on Page 37)**

problem is far from unique. “When municipal governments want to defend their own people, they must confront legal obstacles that prevent them from acting because the issues fall under federal



A shoeshine stand in Apizaco with conflicting messages.  
*Photo by Marie Kennedy.*

jurisdiction—as in the case of water.” In the long run, Ruíz argued,

We need laws that would permit us to do things in an honest manner. The law should require employers to be socially responsible. If they take water from the community, they should give something in

return to improve the quality of life—jobs, help with education and health services. And the extraction of water would be controlled, limited to a fixed amount.

But for Ruíz as mayor, there is no long run. His term of office ends in January 2008 (Mexican mayors are elected for three years, without the possibility of re-election). With no legal leverage, what options are left? “The citizens would have to shut down the plant,” is Ruíz’s blunt response. To be sure, such dramatic action takes more than an outspoken mayor and a disgruntled population. So far, no serious grassroots organization has stepped forward to take the lead. But Mexicans have a long tradition of taking direct action, such as sit-ins and land occupations, to press their demands. In late June, a day-long Environmental Monitoring Caravan for the states of Tlaxcala and Puebla, representing an unprecedented twenty-seven citizens’ organizations, made a special stop in Texcalac, the community next door to Apizaco, to highlight the water issue. If Apizaco activism emerges to join forces with the Chiapas boycott, Coca-Cola’s Mexican bottling operation could well find itself capped.

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created by the reform will promote both greater organization and participation of citizen groups at the grassroots level and greater cross-sectoral coordination of plans at the regional level.

Implementation of these changes would no doubt be difficult; the risks are significant and the level of success in advancing the revolutionary project overall remains to be seen. As in all reforms and revolutions, the easy part will be changing the law, the hard part

will be changing the social relations. But changing the legal structure at this point may also contribute to the ongoing transformation of social relations. Venezuela is, arguably, undertaking the greatest experiment of socialist planning in the world today, and we need to pay attention as it unfolds.

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