



## Latin America May Swing to the Center

By Andres Oppenheimer McClatchy Newspapers

Judging from the latest headlines, you might think that Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's radical-leftist populism is gaining ground in Latin America, and that it will expand its influence in the region over the next few years. But, actually, the opposite may happen.

Before we get into why we may see a shift away from Chavez's narcissist-Leninist political model, let's take a quick look at some of the most recent news. It could suggest a clear advance of radical authoritarianism at the expense of democracy and the rule of law.

In Venezuela, after losing a referendum last year that he hoped would keep him in power forever, Chavez is making a mockery of free elections by prohibiting the best opposition candidates from running in key November elections for governors and mayors.

A pro-Chavez government office has barred 272 politicians from running, including 37-year-old Leopoldo Lopez, a candidate for Caracas mayor and one of the country's most popular politicians.

The government claims Lopez and the others can't legally run because they are facing lawsuits (which in many cases were conveniently filed ahead of the elections by Chavez's cronies). The government's argument is a sham because the law says that only candidates who have been sentenced and found guilty can be barred from running for office. That's not Lopez's case, nor that of many other barred opposition candidates.

In Bolivia, where Chavezbacked President Evo Morales is preparing to hold a referendum Aug. 10 to consolidate his power, the president openly admitted last week that he doesn't believe in the rule of law.

On July 28, Morales said with a foxy smile, 'When a jurist tells me, 'Evo, you are making a legal mistake, what you are doing is illegal,' I go ahead even if it's illegal. I later tell the lawyers, 'If it's illegal, you make it legal. Otherwise, what have you studied for?' " Morales called on lawyers to accept that "politics is above juridical issues."

In Ecuador, President Rafael Correa will hold a constitutional referendum Sept. 28 that in effect would allow him to assume near absolute powers.

Correa, following Chavez's script, is promising to create "a new country." His proposed constitution would allow him to stay in power until 2017, dissolve Congress and in effect take over the independent Central Bank.

In Honduras, President Manuel Zelaya announced last week that his country has become a "full member" of Chavez's Bolivarian People's Alternative (ALBA) regional bloc.

In El Salvador, leftist FMLN candidate Mauricio Funes is leading in the polls for the March 15 elections.

My opinion: The list could go on. (Some would also put Paraguay in Chavez's column, although it's too early to tell.) But, on the other hand, Chavez's leftist authoritarian model is suffering big internal and external blows.

In Venezuela, Chavez's popularity has plunged, as growing numbers of Venezuelans are suffering from a 30 percent inflation rate, massive corruption and nepotism (about two dozen Chavez relatives hold senior government jobs). They also resent a president who gives away petro-dollars from the country's recent oil bonanza in ego-boosting trips abroad.

In Bolivia and to a lesser extent in Ecuador, opposition forces are displaying growing resistance to these countries leaders' efforts to become presidents for life.

In Argentina, President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner's populist government lost its aura of invincibility when Congress — led by her own vice president — overturned a key government bill to further tax soybean exports. Political winds in Argentina are beginning to blow away from pro-Chavez populism and move toward the center.

In Chile, right-of-center candidate Sebastian Pinera is leading in the polls for the next election. Colombia's right-of-center President Alvaro Uribe or one of his ministers is likely to win that country's next election.

Meanwhile, and perhaps most importantly, Brazil, Mexico and Peru are becoming increasingly pragmatic and globalized, and might move closer to the United States once highly unpopular President Bush disappears from the political scene.

In sheer numbers, Latin America's pragmatic-democratic bloc — led by Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Peru and Chile — already accounts for more than 80 percent of the region's economy and more than 90 percent of its foreign investments. I would not be surprised if after a decade of authoritarian populist trends, the pendulum begins to shift

back to the center.

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