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Venezuelans Protest New Socialist Push

Chavez Opponents Are Blacklisted

By Ian James The Associated Press

CARACAS, Venezuela — Riot police used tear gas Wednesday to block hundreds of Venezuelans protesting the latest moves by President Hugo Chavez to concentrate his power. The demonstrators said a blacklist of opposition candidates and a series of socialist decrees are destroying what's left of their democracy.

Though the protest of about 1,000 people chanting "Freedom!" was small compared to past marches, there is a growing public outcry over the sidelining of key government opponents ahead of state and local elections in November.

Chavez said anybody who objects to his decrees is free to challenge them to the Supreme Court. But opponents figure there is little chance the justices will rule against this president. A day after upholding the blacklist, the same court on Wednesday dismissed a challenge by popular Caracas mayoral candidate Leopoldo Lopez and five other blacklisted politicians.

These opponents say the Chavistas have achieved what amounts to a presidential coup, sidelining any opponents with a good chance of winning mayoral and gubernatorial posts. Lopez accused Chavez and the Supreme Court of "giving a kick to the constitution" as he spoke to demonstrators.

"You're afraid of the people and you, President, hid behind the Supreme Court," he said.

Lopez led protesters down a Caracas avenue before police in riot gear blocked them in front of a government building, tossing tear gas canisters into the crowd. Protest leaders vowed more marches, including a larger one Saturday.

Chavez opponents also are outraged by 26 laws the president just decreed, some of them mirroring the socialist measures voters rejected in a December referendum.

"We said in the referendum that we didn't want that, and now he's put it in the decrees," said Josefina Bravo, a 59-year-old who wore a sticker reading "No means no" on her baseball cap. "That's the problem we have: All the powers are concentrated in the president."





FERNANDO LLANO/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS Leopoldo Lopez, center, popular Caracas mayoral candidate, leads a protest against Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez in Caracas on Wednesday. Hundreds of Venezuelans protested against Supreme Court rulings that upheld the barring of a list of mostly opposition candidates — including Lopez — from running in state and local elections in November.

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