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A Bid to Ease Chávez's Power Grip

Students Continue Protests in Venezuela; President Threatens Violence

 By **JOSÉ DE CÓRDOBA**
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CARACAS, Venezuela -- A student movement that has swept across Venezuela is posing a strong challenge to President Hugo Chávez's drive to extinguish independent power centers in the universities and media.

- **The Situation:** Venezuelan students have begun to protest Hugo Chávez's policies, posing a challenge to his government.
- **The Background:** Mr. Chávez has managed to dominate most of his nation's institutions, including the courts, legislature and much of the media.
- **What's Next:** More clashes could take place as students protest Mr. Chávez's plans to use schools as socialist tools.

Although Mr. Chávez continues to have a firm grip on the government, the student protests have demonstrated a broad uneasiness with his efforts to dominate Venezuelan society.

Mr. Chávez's approval ratings have fallen and suspicion of his intentions has grown among Venezuelans. He also hasn't responded to the protests in a way that resonates with the public, many of whom view the students with sympathy.

Instead, he has threatened to use violence to put down the

demonstrations. In Venezuela, as in most Latin American countries, students have played an outsized political role, including in the country's transition to democracy in 1958.


Since he was first elected president in 1998, Mr. Chávez has brought to heel a number of once-independent power centers in Venezuela -- notably the oil industry, judiciary, military and legislature. The university system and a quickly diminishing sector of the Venezuelan media are among the few important institutions outside the ambit of his control.

The student protests were sparked by the closure in late May of an opposition television station, Radió Caracas Television, or RCTV. The students seek to convince Mr. Chávez to give up plans to remake Venezuela's educational system. The closure of RCTV appeared to convince the students that Mr. Chávez meant business when he announced a plan to create a "revolution within the university." Students and professors fear that would mean an end to university autonomy and an imposition of Cuban-style socialist ideology.

"Mediocrity is what they want," says Carolina Rondón, who studies physical therapy in Caracas at the Central University of Venezuela, the country's largest university, as she prepared to join tens of thousands of other students on a protest march Wednesday. "We are marching to save our future." On the side of a building, a huge banner had just one word: "Freedom."

Student organizers have been careful to portray their movement not as anti-Chávez, but as pro-freedom of expression, and have kept their distance from the largely discredited leaders of Mr. Chávez's political opposition. Shunning violent confrontation, students have adapted tactics such as handing grim-faced

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riot police red carnations. One day this week, groups of students with their mouths taped shut rode the city's subways holding signs that said "Peace," and "Tolerance."



Hugo Chavez

To help keep their plans secret from police and the National Guard, which has tried to keep students bottled up at different universities, student organizers use cellphone text messaging to spread the news on future protests.

The number of Venezuelans who have a favorable opinion of the president has fallen 10 percentage points to 39% since November, according to Hinterlaces, a Caracas pollster. Skyrocketing crime, inflation and shortages of basic foods have contributed to Mr. Chávez's fall in popularity since he won re-election by a landslide in December.

In the past, Mr. Chávez, who has spent billions of dollars on social-welfare programs aimed at the poor, has deftly manipulated Venezuela's sharp class divisions to portray his foes as U.S. manipulated "oligarchs."

That tactic hasn't worked this time, as students come from all walks of life and many are poor or working class. "You see all kinds of students here. There are no 'oligarchs,'" says Pamela Lora, a 20-year-old public-health student at UCV. "This has nothing to do with President Bush or with any 'empire,'" she scoffs.

The Chávez government has wavered in its response. After using tear gas and rubber bullets to break up student demonstrations last week, police have moderated their approach. On Wednesday, students were able to deliver their complaints personally to Attorney General Isaías Rodríguez, a Chávez hard-liner.

The state television network, which usually ignores anti-Chávez protests, broadcast the encounter. Mr. Rodríguez listened as student leader Eduardo Torres lectured him: "We are not delinquents, we are democrats and will stay on the streets."



University students display peace signs painted on their hands during a protest in Caracas, Venezuela.

The following day, student representatives delivered a message to Congress, which consists entirely of Chávez supporters because the opposition didn't contest the last legislative election.

Even some Chávez allies in the legislature are expressing dissatisfaction with the president's efforts to consolidate power.

But Mr. Chávez hasn't forsworn threats in dealing with the students, who he has accused of being the dupes of a U.S. plot to destabilize his government. At an hours-long press conference Wednesday, Mr. Chávez threatened to lead "the people" in a bout of "Jacobin revolutionary violence" against students.

Despite his slide in popularity, Mr. Chávez maintains a strong grip on power which the students will have a hard time loosening. Since 1998, Mr. Chávez has survived a short-lived coup and a two-month strike in the state-owned oil company, Petróleos de Venezuela SA, known as PDVSA. Along the way, he has purged the army and has used PDVSA as a piggy bank to fund his ambitious social-welfare program.

Mr. Chávez also controls the country's electoral system, judiciary and legislature.

Since he was re-elected in December, Mr. Chávez has moved against private firms, nationalizing Venezuela's main telephone company and power company while wresting control of billion-dollar

projects from foreign oil firms.

The student protests began after Mr. Chávez refused to renew the broadcast license of RCTV, arguing that the outlet had tried to destabilize his government, been disrespectful of authority and endangered children's morals by showing spicy programming. A Hinterlaces poll showed about 80% of Venezuelans opposed the closure, which also unleashed a barrage of international and domestic criticism. Since then, Mr. Chávez threatened to cancel the license of Globovision, the sole remaining broadcaster that is critical of his rule.

Now, neither Mr. Chávez nor the students seems certain what to do next. Venezuela is scheduled to host teams from the hemisphere for the Copa America soccer tournament this month and would want to avoid scenes of police clashing with students broadcast across Latin America. He may be hoping that protests will peter out as students face final exams and leave on summer vacation.

The students aren't sure how far to take their protests either. This week, at daily morning planning meetings in every university in Caracas, students debated how to balance academic concerns and political action. "I'm prepared to lose a year of my career and two months of classes in exchange for the future we will build," said one ponytailed student delegate at an assembly at Andrés Bello Catholic University this week, to a thunderous round of applause.

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