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## THE AMERICAS

# Chávez gaining support across region

The ideological and economic influence of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez has spread throughout the Latin American nations.

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**CARACAS** - When former Ecuadorean President Abdalá Bucaram addressed a rally last month on his return home from eight years in exile, he vowed to follow a path that he believed would make him popular again: that of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez.

"I come to Ecuador to copy Chávez's style with a great Bolivarian revolution," Bucaram declared to the applause of about 20,000 followers in his home city of Guayaquil.

Bucaram's return was short-lived. Authorities quickly revived the corruption charges that had driven him into exile in Panama in 1997, and he fled the country again.

But his use of Chávez in an attempt to gain political cache illustrated the ripple effect around the region from the Venezuelan's brand of politics -- populist, leftist and, much to the dismay of Washington, strongly anti-United States.

From Argentina, where Chávez followers in a poor Buenos Aires neighborhood clamored for his presence during a recent visit, to Ecuador, where Bucaram called for a Chávez-like "revolution of the poor," the Venezuelan leader's ideology is gaining sway in Latin America.

## REGIONAL PLANS

And with Chávez's oil profits surging and his domestic popularity at an all-time high -- a recent poll showed 70 percent of Venezuelans approve of him -- he has embarked on a series of regional undertakings that would counterbalance U.S. influence in the region.

"His ideas have already expanded" to other nations, said Armando Durán, a former Venezuelan foreign minister.

Principal among these ideas is Chávez's dream of uniting Latin America, much like his hero Simón Bolívar, the 19th century independence hero who tried but failed to forge a country stretching from Peru to Venezuela.

"The Bolivarian revolution is a reality. It's original. It's not like the Cuban revolution. It's a political revolution," Durán added.

Chávez's regional ambitions were evident in Havana last month, where he launched a Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas -- his answer to the U.S.-backed Free Trade Area of the Americas -- before a crowd that included Cuban leader Fidel Castro, and former Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega and Bolivia's Evo Morales, two radical leaders who are seeking the presidency in their home countries.

And while Chávez has poured part of his windfall oil profits into social programs at home and may ease Venezuela away from its dependence on oil exports to the United States, he has been trying to use other

parts of his oil wealth to reach for Bolívar's dream of one Latin America.

Chávez has signed energy agreements with Argentina and Brazil, and in a show of solidarity, offered to buy \$500 million in Argentine government bonds just four years after that country suffered the biggest foreign debt default in world history.

The Chávez administration has also tried to win over some neighbors with offers to sell them cheap oil and natural gas in return for teachers, health workers or, in the case of Argentina, beef. Venezuela's state-run Petroleos de Venezuela is negotiating with Brazil and Argentina to create a regional oil conglomerate, tentatively called Petrosur, that would facilitate those types of swaps.

## **ANTI-AMERICA**

At the same time, Chávez has called on regional leaders to resist signing more trade agreements with the United States, an attractive proposal for Latin Americans who already see the FTAA as a plan to dominate their trade. He has called President Bush "the devil," endearing him to many who are tired of U.S. hegemony in the region.

"He presents an alternative program," said Larry Birns of the liberal Council on Hemispheric Affairs. "He's becoming more and more of an articulator that the time has come for a mixed [state and private enterprise] economy, a mixed economy that is suitable for Latin America."

But Chávez's plan goes further still. His government is bankrolling a new television network, Telesur, that has plans to broadcast news, sports and educational programs across Latin America beginning this summer.

Its organizers say it will not be a Venezuelan government mouthpiece, but Chávez is providing 70 percent of its funding, fueling concerns that the organizers of the network may not have a choice in the matter.

Part of Chávez's influence around the region appears to be by design, part by happenstance.

His rise to prominence comes at a time when Latin America is shifting to the left. In recent years, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Chile and Ecuador have all elected presidents who campaigned on leftist platforms that included attacks on market reforms that Washington promoted in Latin America through the FTAA.

Brazil also has been promoting more regional cooperation, and in Bolivia the anti-globalization movements toppled one government in 2003 and threatened the tenure of another.

"Chávez isn't alone," Morales, the Bolivian congressman and opposition leader, told the newspaper La Crónica in Mexico City recently. "People of Latin America support him."