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
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
Apizaquito, 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.

Marie Kennedy and Chris Tilly recently spent six
months based at the Colegio de Tlaxcala in Mexico, where
Kennedy was a Fulbright Scholar. Kennedy is professor
emerita of community planning at the University of
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economic and social development at the University of
Massachusetts Lowell. Kennedy is the co-chair of the
Planners Network Steering Committee and on the
editorial board of Progressive Planning

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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