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**Maduro pledges to hold referendum on new Venezuelan constitution**

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Venezuelan President Nicholas Maduro promised that the people will have a final say whether to reject or greenlight a new constitution, which a special body called the National Constituent Assembly has been tasked with drafting.

*“I shall propose it explicitly: the new constitution will go to a consultative referendum, so it is the people who say whether they are in agreement or not with the new, strengthened constitution,”* Maduro pledged Thursday in a speech broadcast by state Venezolana de Televisión (VTV), as cited by Reuters.

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He did not provide any details on the date of the proposed plebiscite. He noted, however, that the process of convening the National Constituent Assembly, tasked with drafting the new state law, is in full swing.

Over 30,000 citizens have so far registered to be included in the 540-member body, Maduro said, adding that the deadline for submitting applications expires Friday. The next stage, during which signatures in support of nominees are to be collected across the country, will be launched Saturday and continue until next Wednesday. The elections are expected to take place in July.

Defending his decision to convene the assembly, berated by his opponents as an attack on democracy, Maduro referred to a similar move undertaken by late Venezuelan leader and his predecessor, Hugo Chavez. Chavez convened the body in 1999 for it to come up with a new constitution, a year after he

came to power.

By doing that, Chavez “*awakened the constituent power of the people*,” Maduro [argued](#).

Besides working on a new constitution, the assembly will touch on the most pressing issues, such as restoring peace in the country, devising a new economic model that will be not based on oil revenues, and ensuring the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country, Maduro [said](#).

The announcement comes as the country is remains stuck in a political crisis with society divided by protests against Maduro’s rule. In addition to political discord manifested by violent street clashes that have already left over 60 people dead, Venezuela is suffering from one of its most severe economic crisis in recent times.

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Maduro’s vociferous critics, led by former presidential candidate Enrique Capriles, accuse him of trampling democracy with the convocation of the constituent assembly. They claim that the proposed selection procedure will allow Maduro’s United Socialist Party to ensure that the majority of seats will be taken by its allies. A specific number of seats is set to be reserved for each municipality and workforce sectors, such as students, disabled and farmers.

Maduro insists that his decision to call the constituent assembly is in line with the applicable law citing the ruling by the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court of Justice last week, which did not see any sign of unlawfulness in his move.

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“*The Constitutional Chamber has issued a clear, unequivocal, exhaustive ruling that the convocation of the National Constituent Assembly... is constitutional and legal*,” Maduro said Thursday, as cited by Noticias, after chief state prosecutor Luisa Ortega asked the court to clarify the ruling.

Maduro is convinced the unrest in the country is being ramped up by external influence, particularly that of the US, with him even telling US President Donald Trump to “*get out of Venezuela*” on May 20.

The latest victim of the ongoing unrest is said to be judge Nelson Moncada Gómez, who was shot dead Wednesday while attempting to bypass a street barricade, erected in city’s El Paraíso neighborhood that has witnessed violent skirmishes. The judge was rounded up by unidentified perpetrators who stripped him of his possessions and then killed him as he tried to flee the scene, the public prosecutor’s office said in a statement Thursday.

Meanwhile, some major corporations appear to be taking advantage of Venezuela’s economic plight, with Goldman Sachs reportedly buying around \$2.8 billion worth of bonds issued by Venezuela’s state oil firm, PDVSA.