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Government Declines to Renew License for Venezuela's Oldest TV Network

by LADB Staff

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Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez refused to renew a broadcast license for the country’s oldest privately owned station, Radio Caracas Television (RCTV), in May. The decision brought large-scale protests against the closure of the station and a wave of counterprotests supporting Chavez. The government alleged that the station had actively sought the overthrow of the democratically elected Chavez government during the short-lived 2002 military coup (see NotiSur, 2002-04-19).

The station and its supporters called the nonrenewal an attack on free speech and dissent in Venezuela. International governments and organizations criticized the decision, although a number of regional leaders supported Chavez. The government said it sought to set up greater public access to the airwaves and broader representation of Venezuelans and said RCTV’s facilities would be handed over to the publicly funded Televisora Venezolana Social (TVES).

While RCTV does not have access to its former facilities and the broadcast spectrum, it may continue on satellite television or the Internet and has been available on cable television.

Top court finds nonrenewal legal

On May 23, the Tribunal Supremo de Justicia (TSJ) upheld Chavez’s decision not to renew RCTV’s concession, rejecting a preventive appeal by the station claiming the decision was unconstitutional. Four days later, on May 27, the Ministry of Telecommunications declared that RCTV’s concession to use the public broadcast spectrum had expired, at which point government authorities entered the RCTV facilities to take over its installations, seize equipment, and close the station.

The station’s 20-year concession was established in a resolution on May 27, 1987, leading Chavez officials to say the closure was a matter of time, not politics. Allied governments in the region including those of Presidents Rafael Correa in Ecuador and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua (see NotiCen, 2007-06-07) backed the nonrenewal.

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva refused to "demonize" Chavez in an interview in early May, after weeks of protests against the RCTV closure. He said they mutually supported one another and, after the station had been closed, said it was "an issue for Venezuelan legislation...for the Venezuelan government."

European, US, and nongovernmental-organization (NGO) leaders were more critical. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), for example, said Venezuela’s refusal to renew the license prompted some media outlets to soften their coverage of the government. After an investigation, the New York-based media-advocacy group concluded that the decision to not renew the license was motivated by politics and that the government "failed to conduct a fair and transparent review."
The CPJ said that, because dozens of radio stations and some TV channels also have licenses up for renewal this year, the "case is forcing other outlets to soften their coverage." Both sides in the conflict defended their perspectives as efforts to protect Venezuelan democracy. RCTV and its allies have said that the government is trying to take anti-government television off the air and remove freedom of speech from the airwaves.

Chavez and his backers pointed to RCTV's misreporting during the 2002 coup and its calls for economic sabotage during the management-led strike in Venezuela's central oil industry at Petroleos de Venezuela SA (PDVSA), which created a major setback in the nation's fiscal growth (see NotiSur, 2003-01-31 and 2003-02-28).

Multitudinous marches in favor of RCTV Thousands of protesters carried a blocks-long banner through Venezuela's capital, Caracas, on May 21, condemning the planned closure as a threat to freedom of expression. Shouting "We Want Freedom!" and waving Venezuelan flags, demonstrators warned that replacing RCTV with a public-service station was part of a broad effort to silence criticism. The banner that snaked through the streets read "Freedom of Expression, SOS" in 10 different languages.

"Threats to freedom of expression affect all citizens equally; it doesn't matter if you are for the government or against the government," said Rafael Fuenmayor, a reporter from the Globovision 24-hour news channel, who helped organize the protest along with other local journalists.

Globovision is the only other major opposition-aligned channel, though it does not reach every part of the country. Two other channels that used to be staunchly anti-Chavez recently toned down their coverage, according to the Associated Press and the CPJ. Officials deny any threat to media freedom, arguing that the new TVES network will offer diverse programming while avoiding pro-Chavez propaganda aired on other state-run channels.

A board of directors for the new channel was sworn in May 21. Protesters ended their march outside the mission of the Organization of American States (OAS), where they urged the body to take a closer look at press freedoms under Chavez. OAS Secretary-General Jose Miguel Insulza had warned that failing to allow RCTV to continue broadcasting "would be seen as a form of censorship against freedom of expression." Countries including Honduras, Guatemala, and Chile expressed support for Insulza's position.

Founded in 1953, RCTV is Venezuela's oldest private network and broadcasts a mix of talk shows, soap operas, and a version of "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" It frequently airs complaints of corruption, crime, and inefficiency from both opposition and government supporters, whose grievances are rarely broadcast on state-run TV channels.

RCTV's general manager, Marcel Granier, said the network has the right to continue broadcasting until 2022. Courts have yet to uphold that view, although more cases are pending. Information Minister Willian Lara said the state's right to not renew RCTV's license was "inarguable." He said, "We have reason to believe the upcoming decisions from the TSJ will fall in line with law and justice."
Chavez accuses RCTV and other opposition-aligned private media of supporting the coup against his government by broadcasting cartoons and movies rather than covering street protests that aided his return to office. RCTV's journalists counter that violent protests staged by "Chavistas" outside the channel's headquarters prevented them from reporting the news.

Critics of RCTV say its political coverage is strongly slanted against the government to the point that it may be seen as advocating violence or sedition. During the coup and strike, the four biggest private stations RCTV, Venevision, Televen, and Globovision ran commercials calling for Chavez to resign, said Daniel Hellinger a professor of political science at Webster University in St. Louis and author of several books about Chavez.

"Press relations with governments with authoritarian inclinations are always difficult," said Paul Knox, chair of the school of journalism at Ryerson University in Toronto. "At this point, it's fair to say that the Chavez government has an authoritarian inclination." In a letter to US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, Venezuelan Ambassador Bernardo Alvarez Herrera said that the station had used the public spectrum to subvert the constitutional order.

"The decision to not renew RCTV's license will not affect Venezuela's longstanding commitment to freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and freedom of information," wrote Herrera. "In fact, the majority of Venezuela's media outlets remain in private hands. Of the 81 television stations, 709 radio broadcasters, and 118 newspapers throughout Venezuela, 79, 706, and 118, respectively, are privately owned and operated. More importantly, they all exercise their rights freely, often criticizing the government in strident terms."

Former Associated Press correspondent Bart Jones wrote an opinion piece in the Los Angeles Times, saying that, after the 2002 coup, "RCTV News Director Andres Izarra later testified at National Assembly hearings on the coup attempt that he received an order from superiors at the station: 'Zero pro-Chavez, nothing related to Chavez or his supporters"

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