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## Problems Between Government and Media Continue in Venezuela

by LADB Staff

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Relations between the government and the press are again dominating the political scene in Venezuela, and this time, as in 2007 with Radio Caracas Television (RCTV), the spotlight is on a TV channel, Globovision, which received harsh sanctions. President Hugo Chavez also warned that the station's broadcast license could be revoked "if it does not reconsider its campaign that only aims to sow panic among the population." '

At the same time, 240 radio stations could be taken off the air because they failed to meet the deadline to reregister their technical data and legal composition with the Comision Nacional de Telecomunicaciones (CONATEL). In the absence of a solid and organized political opposition at which to take aim, the government is accusing the media of "orchestrating a terrorist campaign," which it alleges includes paramilitary groups operating in the western states on the border with Colombia.

### *Globovision fined for donated airspace*

On June 5, the tax agency (Servicio Nacional Integrado de Administracion Aduanera y Tributaria, SENIAT) fined Globovision US\$2.3 million. It said the TV channel had evaded taxes for ad revenues from political parties and business chambers that in 2002-2003 organized a prolonged strike in the petroleum sector culminating with the frustrated overthrow of Chavez (see NotiSur, 2002-03-22, 2002-04-19).

During those dramatic days, the station did not run paid ads, and the airspace normally taken up with commercials was filled with messages calling on the public to mobilize against the constitutional government. "That airspace had no value," said Globovision director Alberto Federico Ravell. "We have proved that the station donated the time, but all donations are taxed," said Fanny Marquez, general manager of SENIAT legal services. "Neither Ravell nor Marquez said so, but everyone knows the airspace was very valuable. It was worth a government, it was worth power," author Luis Britto Garcia wrote in his column in the daily Ultimas Noticias.

On June 17, CONATEL took aim at Globovision, opening an administrative investigation that can also include criminal charges and could lead to revocation of the broadcasting license. CONATEL asked the prosecutor's office to determine whether the station committed a crime under the Ley de Telecomunicaciones, in which Article 171 establishes sanctions for media that "use or permit the use of telecommunications services to assist in the commission of crimes."

CONATEL alleges that Globovision violated that law during the transmission of the program Alo Ciudadano, which included an interview with Rafael Poleo, editor of the daily El Nuevo Pais, who said, "Chavez is going to end up like Benito Mussolini." The Italian dictator from 1922 to 1945,

mentor and ally of Adolf Hitler was executed by a group of partisans and his body was hanged upside down in a public plaza in Milan. "Globovision likes to play the victim, but it has been a sick communications medium that violates regulations, resorts to lies, distorts the truth, does everything to destabilize the government, and tries to provoke violence," said Manuel Villalba, president of the Comision de Medios de Comunicacion of the Asamblea Nacional (AN). "Those people need to think a bit with a clear head before airing words such as those of Mr. Poleo, because, if they don't, if they don't change, the station will soon be off the air," warned Chavez. "It is absurd that they complain that we have a dictatorship in Venezuela that violates freedom of expression when they broadcast the words of a man who calls for hanging the president in a plaza."

### *Radio stations fail to update information*

While the Globovision case was being investigated, on July 3 the government announced that it would revoke the licenses of 240 radio stations that had not updated their information with CONATEL. An Associated Press story filed that day explained that the government began a process in May to update data of TV and radio stations based on the law regulating the sector, which requires stations to appear before CONATEL to submit the necessary information. The deadline for receiving the information, which had been extended for almost a month, was June 23. As of that date, 86 AM stations and 154 FM stations had not fulfilled the requirement.

In an interview with foreign journalists who broadcast condemnation of the announcement by the Asociacion Interamericana de Radiodifusion (AIR), Chavez said, "People need to know that when someone has a radio station, that person is only the owner of the equipment and the installations, but the airwaves are the property of all, of the state. The state authorizes their use. They need permission to operate, and they need to fulfill certain administrative formalities, but they have not done so. Therefore, we are applying the Constitution and the law, and that includes, although some don't like it, that the activity be regulated, the business activity not the press function."

AIR and the Camera Venezolana de la Industria de la Radiodifusion (CVIR) say the announced license revocation of those 240 stations has no legal foundation, threatens freedom of expression, and violates the Constitution and other international treaties. The government says that numerous stations, in addition to those that did not fulfill the administrative requirements, operate without permission and that "there is a media latifundio in the country," in that 27 families control 32% of the broadcast spectrum.

In response, the CVIR accused the government of exercising "a virtual information monopoly" through its six TV channels (five national and the continental network Telesur), two national radio networks, a printing business, and a group of "alternative media," which includes some 600 community radio stations and 72 community TV stations.

### *New groups sponsor controversial ads*

This critical panorama was complicated with the appearance of two previously unknown organizations Asoesfuerzo and the Centro de Divulgacion del Conocimiento Economico para la Libertad (CEDICE) which, with the backing of various communications media, launched a costly publicity campaign to defend private property. The government said, "Those entities are using publicity spots to convince the public that there is a real threat in this area, which is deceptive

because they do not specify how the threat against private property is being carried out." Public Works and Housing Minister and CONATEL director Diosdado Cabello said that he would open an investigation because the origin of the money to pay for the spots is not known, which could "mean the presence of money laundering."

The ad in question ran 30 seconds and was titled, "For a country of proprietors." As the camera pans a series of nude bodies, an off-camera voice reads the words written on the screen. "How would you feel if they took away all your years of effort, if they took away your desires to get ahead? How would you feel if they took away your dreams for your children? How would you feel if they took away your future? The social property law takes what is yours. No to the Cuban law. For a country of proprietors. CEDICE in freedom!"

When it refers to children and the future, the ad shows a backlit image of a pregnant woman protecting her womb with her hands. "We cannot allow citizens to continue being taken in by these ads referring to children, which cause anguish, anxiety, fear, panic," said Attorney General Luisa Ortega Diaz, saying she would ask for a law punishing media crimes.

While the government applies sanctions and issues warnings, official Venezuelan TV stations Venezolana de Television and Telesur are being hit by frequent audio and video interference. Cabello said a repetition of these problems "will be interpreted as an aggression and will bring sanctions to the satellite-service providers for both television stations."

Deputy Iris Varela spoke directly of "sabotage that also affects many radio stations in the country." Mario Seijas, head of the Camara Venezolana de Television por Suscripcion, recognized the existence of the anomalies and promised "to take technical measures to repair the damage they are causing."

The problems at Telesur can have international ramifications, as the network is a joint venture of the governments of Argentina, Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Uruguay, and Venezuela. Besides a multinational Consejo de Administracion, Telesur has an advisory board made up of well-known intellectuals and personalities such as 1980 Nobel Peace Prize winner Adolfo Perez Esquivel of Argentina, Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal, Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano, Spanish historian and news chief of Le Monde Diplomatique Ignacio Ramonet, open-software pioneer Richard Stallman from the US, and US actor Danny Glover.

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