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Venezuelans in TV network protest

Thousands of Venezuelans have taken to the streets of Caracas in protest at the president's decision to close the country's oldest private TV network.

Mr Chavez's supporters say Radio Caracas Television (RCTV) backed a 2002 coup which briefly ousted him.



Protesters say this represents a final step for democracy

But the country's opposition say the decision to close the network is an attempt to silence Mr Chavez's critics.

Many of those who turned out for Saturday's protest carried national flags and placards.

"Freedom of speech is a right, as is the right to be informed," said 72-year-old Pablo Mosco from the capital's Catia slum district.

'Final step'

The government claims that the channel is breaching the constitution by rallying support for the opposition.

Near the demonstration, hundreds of Mr Chavez's supporters wearing red caps and T-shirts staged a rival rally to express their support for the closure of RCTV, founded in 1953.

"They're false. They're coup-plotters. This should have happened years ago," said 55-year-old Senny Salas.

Lawyers are fighting the government's decision in Venezuela's Supreme Court and through the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

"What will happen to Venezuela is one of its voices for people to come here and give out their expressions, their opinion [...] will be closed down and this is, I believe, a final step for democracy in Venezuela," said Moira Sanchez, from RCTV's legal team.

The government has offered jobs to staff in a new state-run TV station which will replace RCTV but most say they will refuse them.

The BBC's James Ingham, in Caracas, says that this is shaping up to be a fight between a government that is

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