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Mexico's Fox pans Chavez for building 'dictatorial' regime

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AT ODDS: The majority of Venezuelans are opposed to the president's plan to kick Radio Caracas off the air, arguing that the move would violate their rights

AGENCIES, MEXICO CITY AND CARACAS
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Former Mexican president Vicente Fox said he was ready to ride his horse to Venezuela to defend the South American nation from the "dictatorial" government of Hugo Chavez, a Mexican newspaper reported on Thursday.

According to Mexican daily *El Universal*, Fox remarked during a visit to San Diego, California, that he would gallop south to save Venezuela from Chavez's "authoritarian, demagogical and dictatorial" government.

The barb was a surprise outburst from the former president, who has kept a relatively low profile since his term ended in December, but was a reminder of how far relations have soured between Venezuela and Mexico in the last couple of years.

The countries recalled their ambassadors after sparring in late 2005 in which Chavez called Fox a "lap dog" of the US.

Meanwhile, more than two-thirds of Venezuelans oppose Chavez's plan to kick a TV station aligned with the opposition off the airwaves, many saying it will violate their right to choose what to watch, a private pollster said.

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Seventy percent of 2,000 people polled last week opposed the decision by Chavez not to renew the broadcast license of Radio Caracas Television, Caracas-based pollster Datanalisis said on Thursday.

Chavez accuses the station of supporting a failed 2002 coup against him. He denies his aim is to silence a government critic, but argues the station has violated broadcast laws.

The station has challenged the move in court, but is set to go off the air at midnight on May 27.

About 200 people carrying torches and lanterns marched in support of RCTV on Thursday evening, weaving their way through the streets of the capital to the seat of the telecommunications watchdog, where they held a brief vigil.

Critics accuse Chavez of trampling on freedom of expression, but Datanalisis Director Luis Vicente Leon said most of those polled opposed the measure because "they reject the violation of their right to choose" what to watch on television.

The government has said it plans to create a new public service channel on the frequency.

The survey, which had a margin of error of 2.2 percentage points, showed 16.4 percent supporting Chavez's move, while 13.6 percent declined to respond.

Communication Minister Willian Lara accused RCTV of having financed the survey and dismissed the results as "propaganda" issued by government opponents.

Leon rejected the accusation, saying that the nationwide poll, based on a random sample, was commissioned by private clients that regularly contract Datanalisis' services.

Citing confidentiality agreements, he declined to name the clients but denied that RCTV was among them.

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