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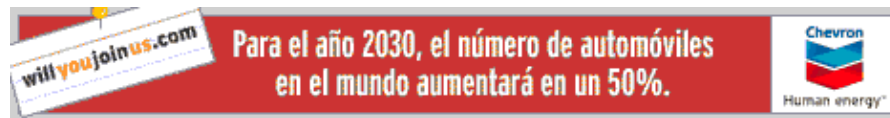
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Chavez's press rights commitment questioned

By Victor Flores

AFP

CARACAS

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Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has drawn condemnation from media rights groups and protests at home for his decision to close a popular private television channel he accuses of backing a 2002 coup.

Three weeks after his December re-election, the leftist leader announced he would not renew Radio Caracas Television's (RCTV) license, which ends May 27, thus taking off the air the only private channel available nationally.

"There will be no new license for this putschist television channel," said Chavez, who has never forgiven RCTV for running cartoons and modeling shows during the brief coup that kept him out of power for 47 hours in April 2002.

The government has also accused the channel of inciting people to join anti-Chavez protests during a three-month general strike that shut down Venezuela's oil industry in 2003.

RCTV director general Marcel Granier has pleaded his case before the Organization of American States (OAS) and European parliament, denouncing what he calls an affront to "independent journalism."

"All of the president's arguments are of political nature, but he has not proven them," said Granier, who has called for the courts to intervene.

Chavez said Friday RCTV would become a "television of the people."

But his decision has drawn the biggest protest since his re-election, with thousands of people taking to the streets of Caracas Saturday. A demonstration had also taken place Thursday.

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According to a survey by polling firm Datanalisis, nearly 70 percent of Venezuelans oppose RCTV's closure while 16 percent support the government's decision.

RCTV, which has broadcast since 1953, is widely watched for its soap operas known as "telenovelas" and the popular humor show "Radio Rochela."

The private broadcaster and the state-owned Venezolana de Television (VTV) are the only channels whose signals cover the entire South American country.

RCTV's demise would leave only one private broadcaster seen close to the opposition: Globovision, which only broadcasts in Caracas.

International media rights groups, including Reporters Without Borders and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), have condemned Chavez's decision to shut down RCTV.

"The government's decision was predetermined and politically motivated, setting an alarming precedent and casting doubt on Venezuela's commitment to free expression," CPJ said on April 24.

Andres Canizales, a media expert at Andres Bello Catholic University, said the government exposes itself to a "high political cost" by seeking to "consolidate" domination over the television industry.

"We go from an unbalanced situation against the government, when Chavez legitimately denounced a media power against him, to the extreme opposite," Canizales told AFP.

Canizales said two private channels that previously sided with the opposition -- Venevision and Televen -- turned their coats in 2005 after Chavez won a recall referendum.

A "very symbolic" meeting took place between Chavez and media magnate Gustavo Cisneros, the owner of Venevision, before the referendum, he said. After the vote, the station dropped an opinion show and replaced a morning newscast with a horoscope program, he said.

Televen, meanwhile, took off the air programs presented by opposition journalists.

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