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Chavez accused of censorship over threat to close TV station

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Published: 10 May 2007

All day and all evening the television in Florentino Santas's busy grocery store in Venezuela's capital city blares out the soaps and telenovelas broadcast by the Radio Caracas Television network.

Mr Santas, his son Juan and their friends who hang around the store drinking beer, are frequently transfixed by the television set upon a fridge, especially on Monday evenings when Radio Rochela - a comedy sketch show that has been entertaining Venezuelans for more than 40 years - is broadcast.

But his simple pleasures may be coming to an end. The broadcast licence of RCTV, the oldest and most popular channel in Venezuela, comes to an end later this month and the government of President Hugo Chavez has indicated that it will not be renewed.

The showdown between Mr Chavez and RCTV is emerging as the latest battlefield between supporters of the thrice-elected leader and his political opponents. His opponents say that the decision not to renew the licence is a blow to press freedom and evidence of what they say is President Chavez's increasing authoritarianism.

His supporters, meanwhile, say that RCTV is responsible for promoting anti-government propaganda and that its news coverage does not represent real journalism. They point to the station's behaviour during the 2002 coup that briefly unseated Mr Chavez.

The network initially urged people to take to the streets, and then enforced a news blackout as the coup started to fall apart. Mr Chavez's supporters say that no other country would permit a broadcaster to behave in such a way.

"RCTV always show the bad side and then incite people to protest," said José Salas, 59, an electrician. "I think it's good that their licence is running out but the closure has nothing to do with politics. They put a lot of shows on that aren't good for the public and they try to alter people's viewpoints."

RCTV's director, Marcel Granier, recently met members of the European Parliament to seek support against the closure, due to take place on 27 May. He has also lobbied the Organisation of American States (OAS) which referred the matter to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

"The threat of Hugo Chavez's decision to close the channel fully violates article 13 of the Inter-American Human Rights Treaty which prohibits discrimination or punishment of journalists based on their editorial position," Mr Granier said last month.

But the Chavez government has hit back. Alejandro Fleming, Venezuela's ambassador to the EU, said: "Europeans would never allow a channel on their televisions to incite violence, support coups, or break the constitutional order."

When he was elected to a third term by a two-thirds majority last November, Mr Chavez vowed he would push forward with his vision of "socialism for the 21st century". He has announced a decision to withdraw Venezuela from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which has sees as tools of US influence.

Not all of Mr Chavez's supporters agree with his decision not to renew RCTV's licence. Gracy Lucela, 23, a streetseller in the Capitolio neighbourhood, said: "I'm a chavista but I don't agree with this at all. The government already has enough channels with TeleSUR, Channel 8, Vive and the others. We need other points of view. " She added: "I watch RCTV every night and I've grown up with it - it's part of our culture." Mr Santas agrees: "I just don't agree with the closure of RCTV. They don't have any reason to do it. There are going to be real problems with freedom of speech in Venezuela and people will be really unhappy if they shut it down."

'Channel Chavez'

* Mr Chavez is launching a television channel that will broadcast in Britain and Spain. Telesur, the channel he started to counter what he claims is biased US coverage of his country, will have offices in London and Madrid.

* From the outset the channel has been accused of simply espousing Mr Chavez's left-wing populism. Telesur's president, Andres Izarra, who was in Madrid yesterday for talks with Spanish partners, said the channel countered the "CNN vision" of Latin America.

* To underscore its independence, Mr Izarra said a deal had been signed with the BBC to exchange content that gave supervision of Telesur production to experts from the BBC.

* Telesur began broadcasting in 2005 in South America. It is planning to open an office in Brussels and then to expand into Africa and Asia.

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