

World Story

Chavez set to shut down TV station in act of revenge

5:00AM Friday May 11, 2007
By Lisa Blackmore

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

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. At these times it requires real determination to attract Santas' attention.

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 this month and the Government of President Hugo Chavez has indicated that it will not be renewed.

The showdown between Chavez and RCTV is the latest battlefield between supporters of the leader and his political opponents.

His opponents say the decision not to renew the licence is a blow to press freedom and evidence of what they say is 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.

Most importantly, they point to the behaviour of the station during the 2002 coup that briefly unseated Chavez when the network ran adverts urging people to take to the streets to call for the ousting of the President.

The network initially supported the coup administration and then enforced a news blackout as the coup started to fall apart as the result of popular demonstrations and pressure.

Chavez supporters say no other country would permit a broadcaster to behave in such a way.

"RCTV are not capable of changing their attitude. They always show the bad side and then incite people to protest," said Jose 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."

RCTV's director, Marcel Granier, recently met members of the European Parliament to seek support against the closure, due to take place on May 27.

He has also lobbied the Organisation of American States, 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," Granier said last month.

But the Chavez Government has hit back. Alejandro Fleming, Venezuela's Ambassador to the European Union, 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, Chavez vowed he would push forward with his vision of "socialism for the 21st century".

He has spent millions of dollars of the country's oil wealth on domestic programmes that have helped tackle poverty, illiteracy and health issues. Recently he announced his decision to withdraw Venezuela from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which he sees as tools of United States influence.

Not all of 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. They're all going to be the same.

"I've grown up with it."

Santas would certainly concur. At his packed-to-the-rafters store he said: "I just don't agree with the closure of RCTV. There are going to be real problems with freedom of speech in Venezuela and people will be really unhappy if they shut it down."

Spreading the word

* Hugo 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 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 the channel's independence, 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.

- INDEPENDENT