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Protesters decry Venezuela's refusal to renew license of opposition-sided TV station

The Associated Press

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CARACAS, Venezuela: Thousands of protesters carried a blocks-long banner through Venezuela's capital on Monday, condemning threats to freedom of expression as one of the country's few remaining opposition-aligned TV stations is set to go off the air within days.

Shouting "We Want Freedom!" and waving Venezuelan flags, demonstrators warned that President Hugo Chavez's plan to replace Radio Caracas Television with a public-service station is part of a broad effort to silence criticism. The banner that snaked through the streets read "Freedom of Expression, SOS" in 10 different languages.

"Threats to freedom of expression affect all citizens equally; it doesn't matter if you are pro-government or against the government," said Rafael Fuenmayor, a reporter from the Globovision 24-hour news channel, who helped organize the protest along with other local journalists.

Globovision is the only other major opposition-aligned channel, though it does not reach all parts of the country. Two other channels that used to be staunchly anti-Chavez recently toned down their coverage.

RCTV is due to go off the air Monday, after Sunday's final day of programming, when the government says its license expires.

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Officials deny any threat to media freedom, arguing that a new station called TVES will offer diverse programming while avoiding pro-Chavez propaganda aired on other state-run channels. A board of directors for the new channel was sworn in Monday.

Protesters ended their march outside the mission of the Organization of American States, where they urged the body to take a closer look at the state of press freedoms under Chavez.

OAS Secretary-General Jose Miguel Insulza has warned that failing to allow RCTV to continue broadcasting "would be seen as a form of censorship against freedom of expression." Countries including Honduras, Guatemala and Chile have expressed support for Insulza's position.

Founded in 1953, RCTV is Venezuela's oldest private network and broadcasts a mix of talk shows, soap operas and a version of "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" RCTV frequently airs complaints of corruption, crime and inefficiency from both opposition and government supporters, whose grievances are rarely broadcast on state-run TV channels.

RCTV's general manager, Marcel Granier, said the network has the right to continue broadcasting until 2022 and challenged the government's decision in court.










Venezuela's Supreme Court on Thursday dismissed the first of a series of legal challenges by RCTV, but more are pending.

Information Minister Willian Lara said the state's right not to renew RCTV's license was "inarguable," and predicted on Sunday that Venezuela's highest court would uphold the measure.

"We have reason to believe the upcoming decisions from the Supreme Court of Justice will fall in line with law and justice," Lara said.

Chavez accuses RCTV and other opposition-aligned private media of supporting a failed 2002 coup against him by broadcasting cartoons and movies rather than covering street protests that aided his return to power. RCTV's journalists counter that violent protests staged by "Chavistas" outside the channel's headquarters prevented them from reporting the news.

Venezuela still has a broad mix of newspapers, including many that are critical of the government.

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