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**The closure of RCTV**  
Tuesday, May 22nd 2007

At 11.59 pm on Sunday, May 27, Venezuela's oldest and most popular TV station, RCTV, will be forced to cease broadcasting. Some minutes after midnight on Monday, May 28, that portion of the electronic spectrum which RCTV has occupied for the last 53 years will crackle into life again with a transmission from a new channel called TEVES (Venezuelan Social Television Station). This latest TV operation which is touted as a public broadcaster (as opposed to a government broadcaster) will nevertheless be funded in the first instance by the Venezuelan state, with an initial board of directors appointed by the Ministry of Communications and Information.

Up until about two months ago, there was still some hope that President ChÁvez would change his mind about RCTV, but that seems very unlikely now that he has signed the decree whereby TEVES will replace the privately-owned Caracas station. In addition, late on Thursday Venezuela's supreme constitutional court dismissed the action brought by RCTV's owner Marcel Granier and others to stop the closure. While that does not mean their legal options are now exhausted, observers feel there is little possibility of a victory in the courts at this stage.

Recently, Mr Granier has been on the grand tour of western capitals trying to rally support, and hard on his heels have come Venezuelan government ministers assuring everyone, as they did in Madrid, that the RCTV proprietor is misrepresenting the situation since his station is not to be closed down, it is merely to be denied a renewal of its licence. The world-weary Europeans, who have infinite experience of dictators and their linguistic stratagems were hardly likely to be duped. And neither was anyone else fooled by this specious distinction anywhere else on the globe. No doubt to the irritation of Miraflores, there has been a huge outpouring of international support for the private station, not least from the leading organizations of this hemisphere, as well as from individual media houses and their associations, such as the Brazilian National Association of Daily Newspapers.

Mr ChÁvez has remained entirely unmoved by the torrent of international criticism in relation to his RCTV decision. In one of his AlÁ³ Presidente programmes towards the end of April he castigated the media as "swine," being reported by El Universal as saying, "People believe they can put pressure on me by appealing to international organizations, foreign governments and the evil court of this and that, with demonstrations. Forget it!" Taking his cue from his boss, Foreign Minister NicolÁis Maduro added his own contumely: "Our country's responsiveness has been reinforced to counter the lies of the association of the untouchable, which is the gang of media owners in most parts of the world." It is not the kind of language normally

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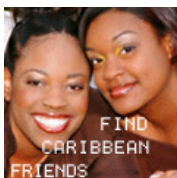
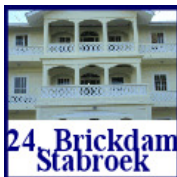
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associated with those evincing a commitment to the free media.

It is not as if President Chavez's move against Mr Granier's station has been popular at home either. According to a Datanalisis poll last month, seventy per cent of the population disapproves of the closure, and there have been massive rallies in Caracas in support of the private network. One suspects that the enormous popularity which RCTV enjoys with the Venezuelan public (including Chavistas) has less to do with its political programming and everything to do with the fact that it shows a number of the country's best-loved soap operas. It is not as if TEVES will be in a position to replace these in the short term; it will instead have to rely on four soap operas imported from Peru, Colombia and Argentina.

President Chávez must have some very strong motives for taking on the country's oldest and most popular network, and for depriving the public - his own supporters included - of their favourite programmes. As reported by Venezuelanalysis, the reason given by government officials for the closure has been that RCTV supported the abortive 2002 coup, and is guilty of 652 violations of the Law on Responsibility in Television and Radio. While it is true that RCTV behaved totally irresponsibly during 2002, so did every other private TV and radio station. It can only be asked, therefore, why the network is being singled out for punishment, and then only five years after the event. And as Mr Granier himself was reported as saying, if President Chávez believes him to be guilty of treason, then he should place him before the courts. As for the infamous TV and radio law, that has been condemned by every respectable media organization across the planet as being designed to inhibit freedom of expression. Furthermore, El Universal reported Minister of Communications and Information William Lara as admitting that even the government TV stations were not in compliance with the law, particularly in terms of the quotas laid down in it for local programming. Given that TEVES is going to have to import soap operas for the time being, it doesn't sound as if the new station will be in full conformity either.

No one is in very much doubt that the Venezuelan president's motives are political. If he really wanted a public broadcaster transmitting on the spectrum, he had no need to take over an existing network in order to set one up. Significantly, RCTV has been the victim of attacks by gangs associated with Chávez in the past, and its journalists and other employees have been assaulted on several occasions by those linked to the administration. No one has ever been charged in relation to these cases. It should be said that the government is maintaining that the station's transmissions need not be halted altogether, since Mr Granier has the option of broadcasting either on cable or satellite. It is of course being disingenuous, since even if he does that he would still lose his mass audience. It is the mass following with which the government TV stations no doubt cannot compete that has Miraflores uneasy; after all, people who watch the soaps might leave the channel switched on and then in couch potato mode go on to view a newscast informed by an opposition perspective.

There is something else too which may have attracted the government's attention, and that is according to an interview with Ms Luisana Colomine of the information ministry reproduced by Venezuelanalysis, RCTV enjoys the best signal in Venezuela. "In any corner of the country," she said, "you put a clothes hanger on top of the TV and the only channel that comes in clear is RCTV." She went on to say that there were other channels whose licences were due to expire, but that they didn't "have this privileged sector of the spectrum."

So there it is: an opposition network which has a signal that can reach any part of the country, attracts a huge audience for its soap operas and has been a frequent target of attacks by Chávez supporters, is now to be effectively closed down. If the President of Venezuela can get away with ending the transmissions of the country's most powerful independent station, then all the other smaller operators will stand little chance when their turn comes. In addition, Mr Chávez's action will serve to

intimidate the independent media as a whole and their journalists in particular. If RCTV goes dark at midnight on May 28, therefore, a pall will be cast over freedom of expression and democracy in Venezuela.

And what can the millions of soaps fans look forward to from Venezuela's first public broadcaster? When they tune in at 12.01 on the morning of May 28 after TEVES introduces itself, they will then be able to settle down to a movie entitled Eternal Bolivar.

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