



Venezuela

Chávez silences critical TV station - and robs the people of their soaps

Protests as private network loses licence to broadcast after 53 years on air

Rory Carroll in Caracas
Wednesday May 23, 2007

Guardian

Drums roll, the music swells, and the camera zooms in on a man seated behind a desk. His face is sombre for there are grim tidings to report.

Venezuela is in crisis. Inflation is soaring. There are acute shortages of milk, eggs and meat. Violent crime is taking more than 100 lives every week. The government is in chaos. Corruption is draining the country's oil wealth.

These are the bulletins of Radio Caracas Television, the country's most influential private network. The theme is consistent: President Hugo Chávez is leading the country to ruin and if he is not stopped Venezuela will become a Cuba-style dictatorship.

At midnight on May 27, however, RCTV will be stopped. Its bleak bulletins silenced because the government is refusing to renew its broadcast licence. Critics say an authoritarian hammer is crushing free speech and what is left of Venezuela's democracy. Supporters say the government is right to replace a channel notorious for lies, manipulation and anti-Chávez propaganda.

Tens of thousands of people marched in two rival rallies at Caracas last week, one mourning the decision, the other celebrating. More are expected this week and the volume of international protest - and praise - is set to swell.

None of it will alter the decision. Mr Chavez recently said on his own television show. "It's over." His opponents cannot save RCTV, he added. "Say what they say, do what they do, howl where they want, the licence will not be renewed."

Notorious

No one disputes that Venezuela will be a different place without the channel. For 53 years it has been part of the cultural landscape, drawing more than 40% audience share with comedies, soap operas and game shows such as Who Wants to be a Millionaire. In an opinion poll last month 70% opposed the closure, 16% approved and 13% declined to answer. Those opposed were more upset about losing their favourite programmes than the alleged erosion of freedom of speech.

Despite the unpopularity of his decision Mr Chávez's approval ratings hover at 65%, close to the landslide he won in last December's election, his third consecutive triumph since sweeping to power in 1998. His battle with RCTV began soon afterwards. He was adored by the poor majority as one of their own, a man from the slums who directed oil revenues towards social programmes, but the media establishment considered him a dangerous radical.

When a military coup ousted Mr Chávez in 2002 RCTV and three other private networks backed it. When the streets filled with people demanding the president's return the channels ran cartoons in a vain effort to ignore the popular will.

Mr Chávez branded the four channels fascist and "horsemen of the apocalypse" but allowed them to continue broadcasting after he was reinstated. Under its director, Marcel Granier, RCTV's hostility did not abate. Its news bulletins focus on crime, economic woes and Mr Chávez's increasing power and play down evidence of social progress.

The government says it showed remarkable restraint by waiting until now, with the expiry of RCTV's free-to-air license, to banish its baleful influence. Instead of soap operas and hysterical news the slot will be filled with a "public service" channel, it said.

Arturo Sarmiento, the president of TeleCaribe, a free to air regional channel, said RCTV had no right to preach freedom of speech given its behaviour during the coup. "They're a bunch of hypocrites." Some leftwing commentators have welcomed the channel's imminent demise, among them Ignacio Ramonet, the French director of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, and Tariq Ali, the British political activist.

"This was a channel openly calling for the overthrow of a democratically elected government," said Mr Ali.

He compared the case to Thames Television's loss of its broadcast franchise after airing *Death on The Rock*, a 1988 documentary about the killing of three IRA members which infuriated Margaret Thatcher's government. It was a controversial but legal decision, said Mr Ali.

Hypocrites

Both commentators were in Caracas last weekend for a media conference sponsored by Telesur, a Venezuela-funded pan-regional channel intended to rival CNN and promote Mr Chávez's vision of a unified South America.

RCTV's 2,500 staff have been told to continue turning up for work after May 27 in the hope that some programmes will still be made if they can be sold to other networks, and that RCTV may be able to limp on as a cable channel. But with vastly reduced audience share and advertising revenue it is unclear how long their jobs will last.

"People are scared and angry," said Moirah Sanchez, a lawyer who is leading the company's last-ditch attempt at the supreme court to overturn the government's decision. RCTV claims its licence has another 20 years to run but few expect the Chávez-appointed judges to agree.

Ms Sanchez admitted that "a mistake was made" during the confusion of the 2002 coup but said this was not justification to shut down the channel. "Our concern is that the entire nation is losing what has been its voice for 53 years."

With RCTV gone the government would achieve its stated aim of information hegemony, she said. Of the four channels which sided against Mr Chávez in the coup two have since neutered their news coverage in an apparent deal with the government.

A third, Globovision, continues to attack the government but reaches only 10% of viewers. RCTV was singled out, said Ms Sanchez, because it posed a more serious challenge to Mr Chavez's radical agenda of nationalisations, land reform and constitutional change.

In contrast to RCTV's grim news agenda - which some staff admit is lopsided - state channels go to the other extreme and show scenes of happy peasants, singing children and a nation grateful for subsidised food and free medical care. On occasion government officials are criticised but never the president.

The last flickers of dissent were being extinguished, said Ms Sanchez. "Every radio and television station feels threatened and intimidated by the fact RCTV is being closed down."

Many ordinary Venezuelans such as Marisol Torres, 55, a Chávez supporter who lives in a slum, feel uneasy about the decision and wonder if it marks a political watershed. "It's better to have more voices," she said. Her more immediate concern was the prospect of losing shows such as La Rochella, similar to Candid Camera, and Who Wants to be a Millionaire? "It's the best stuff on the box. Now what am I going to watch?"

State channel reports raging success

Hugo Chávez's socialist revolution is an unmitigated success which had fresh triumphs to report yesterday, according to the state-run channel 8, known as Venezolana de Television (VTV).

Preparations for La Copa America, a pan-regional football tournament which is to be held in Venezuela, were well advanced and the nation now had shiny new stadiums to host the matches, according to public service adverts.

A series of cultural events were heightening consciousness of national identity and teaching children to respect their heritage, said a chat show panel.

RCTV, the opposition channel which lied and undermined democracy, had failed to galvanise meaningful international support in its battle to stay on the airwaves, said a news report.

Land reform was transforming once idle sugar plantations into successful agricultural cooperatives run by enthusiastic peasants along socialist principles, said a documentary.

The president's efforts to unite his sprawling movement into a single, united party was drawing widespread enthusiasm, concluded a political report.

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