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TV closure sparks Venezuela media freedom fears

Thu May 24, 2007 9:26PM BST

By Brian Ellsworth

CARACAS (Reuters) - Venezuela's RCTV television station had viewers roaring with a spoof of leftist President Hugo Chavez after he misspelled a word while promoting a nationwide literacy campaign four years ago.

Within months, the government passed anti-defamation laws that forced the station's slapstick comedy show Radio Rochela, which had ribbed presidents for more than 40 years, to drop its impressions of his folksy idiosyncrasies.

Now, Chavez plans to have the last laugh: RCTV goes off the air on Sunday night.

Opponents say the government's refusal to renew the station's license is an assault on press freedom and further proof the former soldier's self-styled socialist revolution is centralising power and trying to crush opposition.

"Chavez is going to silence the people who support him, he is going to silence the people who are against him," said Berenice Gomez, a 30-year veteran reporter, at a tearful gathering of RCTV staff this week.

"The only voice that is going to be left will be his."

Chavez, a staunch ally of communist Cuba, says RCTV is losing its license for supporting a failed 2002 coup, inciting anti-government demonstrations, and showing risqué soap operas that he calls immoral.

He has also slammed it for pejorative representations of the country's poor majority that helped him win a landslide re-election in December, and he is preparing to replace it with a government-backed public service channel.

"There will be no concession for a coup-supporting channel called RCTV," Chavez told a military audience in December.

INTIMIDATION

Chavez already has firm control over Venezuela's Congress, courts and crucial oil sector. Critics say the RCTV move will leave no national television stations opposed to the government and will intimidate other media to muzzle their criticism.

RCTV began broadcasts in 1953, and is the country's oldest private broadcaster.

The decision has drawn sharp criticism abroad and caused an outcry in Venezuela, where seven in 10 oppose the decision, according to a leading pollster.

"President Hugo Chavez is misusing the state's regulatory authority to punish a media outlet for its criticism of the government," said Jose Miguel Vivanco of the U.S.-based Human Rights Watch.

The U.S. Senate was expected to vote on a resolution backing RCTV this week.

Venezuelan reporters say they face growing pressure from the state to minimise criticism, and describe a creeping process of internal censorship with editors shying away from covering issues like crime and corruption.

Although newspapers continue to slam Chavez, employees say they have gradually softened their editorial lines to maintain good graces with the government as it unleashes a flood of advertising dollars.

But even Chavez's critics say Venezuela's media, in particular RCTV, has repeatedly violated journalistic ethics by openly backing opposition politicians.

Chavez was a darling of the media after he led a failed 1992 military coup, but there was not a long honeymoon after he was elected in 1998.

Television stations supported a bungled April 2002 coup attempt against him and then turned off news cameras and showed cartoons as pro-Chavez protests helped return him to power.

They joined an opposition strike later that year by showing only opposition marches and anti-Chavez propaganda for weeks.

But RCTV was never convicted in court for any crime and its defenders say the move to shut it down is arbitrary.

RCTV employees ranging from makeup artists to camera crews have vowed to keep working even after it is off the air.

"This is not just about RCTV," said reporter Iznardo Bravo, a nine-year veteran of the station. "We are just a small part of what's happening throughout the country."

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