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Chavez Pulls Plug on Venezuela's Favorite Television Network

By Alex Kennedy

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May 25 (Bloomberg) -- Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez plans to put the nation's most popular TV network off the air this weekend, accusing the broadcaster of "coup-mongering" and causing "moral damage" with violent, sex-filled programming.

Chavez is refusing to renew the license for Radio Caracas Television, known as RCTV, whose mix of news, soap operas, comedy and reality programming make Venezuela's oldest private network also its most watched. At midnight May 27, RCTV stands to become the country's first network to lose its license.

Opposed by more than two-thirds of Venezuelans in a poll last month, the decision not to renew RCTV's license is both unpopular at home and has earned Chavez condemnation abroad from groups such as the European Parliament as he consolidates his power and silences critics in Venezuela.

"Chavez controls the judiciary, the congress, the electoral body, and gradually the TV networks," said Alvaro Vargas Llosa, senior fellow at the Oakland, California-based Independent Institute and the author of books on Ernesto "Che" Guevara and Latin America. "This is one more step toward total control."

The National Assembly in February gave Chavez the power to make law by decree for 18 months, and the former army lieutenant colonel is seeking to change the constitution this year to allow for his indefinite rule.

'Civil Society'

Without a broadcast license, RCTV has the option to continue on cable or satellite, serving about 20 percent of Venezuela's homes. Eighty percent of Venezuelans only have access to broadcast television.

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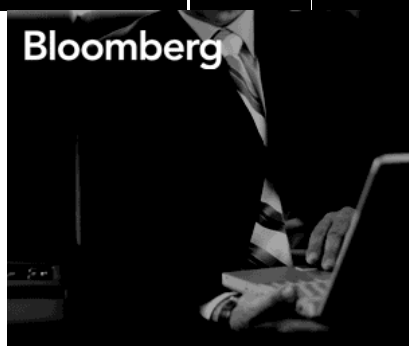
While the National Telecommunications Commission, or Conatel, headed by Telecommunications Minister Jesse Chacon, has authority over broadcast licenses, Chavez has made clear it was his decision not to renew the permit RCTV got in 1987.

Since the April 2002 failed coup and a two-month national strike in 2003 that most private media supported, Chavez has sought to increase the government's presence on television by funding five new stations to spread his message.

"We were outgunned before," Chavez said in a May 18 speech. "Now the state is liberating itself from civil society and its media."

Chavez plans to hand over RCTV's frequency, Channel 2, to a new state-run station in place of RCTV and hits such as, "Radio Rochela," Latin America's longest-running program.

Organizations critical of the shutdown include London-based Amnesty International, New York-based Human Rights Watch and New York-based



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journalist advocacy group Committee to Protect Journalists.

'Four Horsemen'

During the coup and strike, the four biggest private stations -- RCTV, Venevision, Televen and Globovision -- ran commercials calling for Chavez to resign, said Daniel Hellinger, a professor of political science at Webster University in St. Louis and author of several books about Chavez.

"All four stations were in on it; the media became an opposition political party," Hellinger said in a phone interview.

Chavez, who had regularly criticized the private television stations following the 2003 strike, calling them "the four horsemen of the apocalypse," no longer scolds Venevision and Televen as they have eased criticism of the government.

"Other channels have negotiated their commitment to the Venezuelan people," said Miguel Angel Rodriguez, host of RCTV's "The Interview" show. "We don't negotiate our editorial line and that's what this shutdown is all about."

Venevision spokesman Jose Ramon de la Cotera and Televen spokesman Enrique Alvarado didn't return messages left at their offices.

Viewership

RCTV has Venezuela's highest viewer rating, with an average of 30 percent of the audience, according to research firm AGB Nielsen. France-based Reporters Without Borders suggested Chavez targeted RCTV for its popularity and criticism of the government.

"Why have you unilaterally decided to rescind the license of Venezuela's most popular broadcast media?" the group asked Chavez in a February letter. "Would its editorial line, one of open opposition to the government, bother you so much if it had fewer viewers?"

Venezuela's Supreme Court on May 17 dismissed a suit by RCTV against Chavez and Chacon for refusing to renew its license.

'Pack Your Bags'

Most Venezuelans oppose the shutdown, according to a poll by research company Datanalisis. About 69 percent of those surveyed were against the closure, with 16 percent supporting it, said pollster Luis Vicente Leon. The April 9-16 survey of 2,000 Venezuelans has a margin of error of 2.2 percentage points.

"It's unusual for Chavez to do something this unpopular," Leon said, adding that Chavez's approval rating was 65 percent in the company's last poll in March. "But we haven't seen this issue hurt this overall popularity."

Chavez won a third term in the Dec. 3 presidential election with 63 percent of the vote and declared his intentions regarding RCTV three weeks later.

"Pack your bags and turn off the lights," Chavez, 52, said during a televised speech on Dec. 28, weeks after winning re-election. "There won't be a new concession for a coup-mongering television station called RCTV."

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