

NEWS ANALYSIS

Chávez Looks at His Critics in the Media and Sees the Enemy

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Student demonstrators during a Wednesday protest in Caracas, Venezuela, against the government shutdown of Radio Caracas Televisión, which was known for its criticism of President Hugo Chávez.

By SIMON ROMERO Published: June 1, 2007

CARACAS, [Venezuela](#), May 31 — “Sound the alarm in the hills, slums and towns to defend our revolution from this new fascist attack,” President [Hugo Chávez](#) said in a nationally televised speech this week as his government was under siege by student protests over his decision to take a dissident television network off the air. “We are waiting for you.”

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With such chilling threats of retribution, Mr. Chávez seems prepared to harden his treatment of both the protesters and any media organizations that oppose him, even as the demonstrations ebbed somewhat on Thursday.

Analysts say such statements reflect a savvy reading of Venezuela’s polarized politics that has enabled him to withstand acute challenges to his government, like the general strike that paralyzed the economy in 2002. Protests then were larger, and a plunge in oil exports wreaked economic havoc, but Mr. Chávez emerged stronger than before.

“Chávez cannot appear to be weak among his own people, or to be another Allende,” said Steve Ellner, a political scientist at Oriente University in eastern Venezuela, referring to Salvador Allende, the Chilean socialist toppled in a 1973 coup.

“Allende was a gentleman, but it didn’t get him anywhere,” Mr. Ellner said. “Chávez is appealing to his base with aggressive language and a refusal to compromise with the opposition, which is portrayed as the enemy.”

On Sunday, the government closed the dissident station, Radio Caracas Televisión, or RCTV, describing the action as a regulatory decision based on the network’s support for a brief coup in 2002.

Opponents say the decision is evidence that Mr. Chávez’s definition of the enemy has been enlarged to include news media outlets that are critical of his government. Otherwise, say detractors like Teodoro Petkoff, the editor of the small opposition newspaper Tal Cual, Mr. Chávez would have also decided not to renew the licenses of

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Venevisión and Televen, networks whose coverage similarly supported the 48-hour coup in 2002. Those networks have become far less critical of Mr. Chávez, while RCTV has maintained its criticism.

Indeed, watching television here this week has become a lesson in how Mr. Chávez is extending his control beyond political institutions to include the broadcast media. It is a marked shift from the early years of his presidency, when he faced vitriolic criticism from most news organizations, which were owned by the country's moneyed elite.

With Chávez loyalists controlling the National Assembly, the Supreme Court and the federal bureaucracy, and with RCTV off the air, coverage of the protests by every television broadcaster except a small cable news network, Globovisión, fell into ideological step with the coverage by Mr. Chávez's expanding state-controlled broadcasting interests.

Venevisión, the largest private television network, showed soap operas during many of the protests, largely ignoring them. And Venezolana de Televisión, or VTV, the main government network, paid relatively little attention to the protests, instead interviewing government officials and pro-Chávez student groups at smaller counterprotests.

Mr. Chávez also urged legal action against Globovisión this week, the only remaining network that is explicitly critical of him. Relying on analysis by semioticians of video broadcast in recent weeks by Globovisión of the shooting of [Pope John Paul II](#) in 1981, Mr. Chávez said the images were an attempt to incite an assassination attempt against him.

"Yesterday's news," Mr. Petkoff, the editor of *Tal Cual*, wrote in an editorial on this latest assertion by Mr. Chávez that he is the target of an assassination plot. "A cartoon rerun. Paranoia and manipulation."

Meanwhile, even as Mr. Chávez's supporters expressed optimism over the future of TVEs, the new state television network created to occupy RCTV's signal, bulletins on VTV, the main state network, reported on vague accusations here that the Bush administration was plotting to assassinate Mr. Chávez.

VTV also continued broadcasting *La Hojilla*, an opinion program that pillories the president's critics. Pro-Chávez cabinet officials and lawmakers, in an illustration of how polarized Venezuela remains, continued to deride the student protests as destabilization efforts.

"They came out because they're looking for deaths to keep justifying themselves," Iris Varela, a member of the National Assembly, said of the protesters.

Faced with mounting condemnations from international organizations like [Human Rights Watch](#), Reporters Without Borders and the [Committee to Protect Journalists](#) that say the RCTV decision was an effort to stifle freedom of expression, Mr. Chávez's government has shown no sign of reconsidering the move.

Political analysts said this could be explained at least in part by what they called the president's "convoking power," or his ability to rally his supporters in times of distress.

While almost 40 percent of voters in last year's election opted for Mr. Chávez's opponent, the president's support topped 60 percent and he still enjoys wide popular backing. This level of support is expected to be on display Saturday, when Mr. Chávez has called for large demonstrations in support of the RCTV decision.

Until then, however, the message from students is still being heard, if not widely broadcast, in Venezuela. "They are taking our free speech away," said Sandra Bellizzia, a marketing student at Alejandro Humboldt University who had "RCTV" painted in black on her face at a protest here on Thursday. "If they closed any channel, it would mean the same thing."

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Jens Erik Gould contributed reporting.

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