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THE AMERICAS

The Young and the Restless

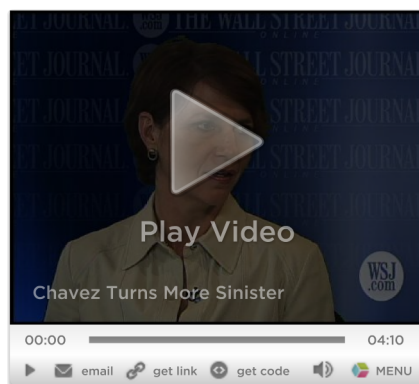
By MARY ANASTASIA O'GRADY

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As tens of thousands of antigovernment student protestors poured into the streets of Caracas last week and national guard troops used tear gas and rubber bullets against them, many observers were asking whether Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez had finally met his Waterloo. Will his decree to strip 53-year-old Radio Caracas Television of its broadcasting license -- the spark that ignited the protests -- turn out to be his bridge too far?

If only.

An avowed Marxist, Mr. Chávez is in the process of destroying his country. Of this there is no doubt. But he is also an international menace, and a rich one at that. He has been using his oil wealth to sow revolution, à la Fidel Castro, in South and Central America. Did we mention that he's a dear friend of the Iranian government? Most of Latin America by now has his number, and it would be hard to find a democrat in the Western Hemisphere who wouldn't cheer his retirement and the return of checks and balances in Venezuelan government.




But that's only going to happen when Venezuelans decide they have had enough of him. And that's why the push-back against the confiscation of RCTV has gotten so much attention. Though no one knows if this will turn out to be a defining moment, it is certain that by trying to limit free speech Mr. Chávez has energized and broadened his opposition.

The film footage from last week's violence in Caracas, and six other cities around the country, largely featured unarmed university students in T-shirts and jeans caught in clouds of tear gas, being chased and beaten by helmeted jackboots, and fired on with water cannons. Yet none of this deterred the students in their acts of civil disobedience.

Mary Anastasia O'Grady explains why the Venezuelan president's cancellation of RCTV has incited the country's residents.

Until now, students have not played a role in anti-Chávez activism. Eight years of property confiscations, the jailing of government adversaries and the manipulation of voter rolls and elections prompted almost no student response at all. But the attack on free speech hit a nerve and sent them to the streets. This has captured the attention of the nation because student resistance movements have an

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important history in Venezuela. In recent days many have been recalling that it was an uprising from the universities that precipitated the fall of dictator Marcos Pérez Jimenez in 1958.

Still, it is not clear that this is a grassroots movement that will run Mr. Chávez out of town. It is true that the students who are out in the streets attend the large state-run schools and therefore probably do not come from Venezuela's elite families. But they are not from the nation's most destitute families either, where Mr. Chávez finds his strongest support. It is safe to say that they mostly represent the country's middle and lower-middle income sectors. Yet it is notable that the protests have spread beyond wealthy Caracas to include public universities in poorer parts of the country where student bodies tend to be even more humble.

What is also new, and even more interesting, about this resistance movement is its focus on "freedom" and calls to end "the dictatorship." Mr. Chávez's beloved Revolution may have once claimed the moral high ground by asserting that its enemies plotted a nondemocratic coup on April 11, 2002. But now the president and his *chavistas* seem to be the ones on the defensive, with polls showing more than 70% of Venezuelans opposed to the closing of RCTV. This suggests that the dissatisfaction does indeed cut across economic classes.

The reason for the outrage might be practical as well as ideological. RCTV had more than 44% of the nation's television market share and offered, along with contrarian political views, a wide range of entertainment. For many poor, working-class Venezuelans, whose evening soap opera is one of life's few pleasures, the end of RCTV is nearly unforgivable. This is especially so because it has been replaced by a government-run station that Venezuelans say is boring. Mr. Chávez has not only encroached on precious political turf but he has yanked an almost sacred property right out of the Venezuelan living room.

As we noted in this space two weeks ago, there is simmering discontent in the economy as well. Oil prices are high but Venezuelans are no better off than they were eight years ago. Food shortages are growing more common and even the poor, whom Mr. Chávez says he is intent on helping, are struggling. Now the best free entertainment in the country has been curtailed. A perfect storm may be brewing.

That Mr. Chávez has fallen from grace and that a majority of Venezuelans now want him gone is not hard to fathom. But even if it is true, he is not likely to go down without a fight and he is in a far better position to prevail using force than he was five years ago. He has built up support inside the military, armed a street militia and refined intelligence tactics using Cuban personnel. Last week he threatened to call the masses down from the slums on the hills around Caracas to defend the Revolution. Some Venezuelans are worried that he is trying to provoke his opponents to move against him so that he can respond with force.

This reveals the true politics of Mr. Chávez and suggests that he no longer feels it necessary to keep up the appearance of a "democracy." Why bother? His move against RCTV already has damaged his image as a crusader for justice and he has been criticized by such groups as Amnesty International, Reporters Without Borders, Human Rights Watch and the Catholic Church. Even Brazilian President Luis Inácio "Lula" da Silva, who is an old friend of Fidel Castro and who, up to now, has been reluctant to criticize Mr. Chávez, has subtly signaled disapproval of the closing of RCTV. "If many times a wave of negative coverage about the government looks bad to me, it would be much worse if democracy did not exist in this country," he told a broadcasters conference in Brazil last week. Democracy, he added, is a system that allows "the press to say what it wants, when it wants, to be judged by the only ones that matter: the listeners, the television watchers and the readers."

The only way to recover approval from Lula and the rest of the civilized world would be to backtrack on the RCTV decision. Mr. Chávez is not likely to do that anymore than he is likely to voluntarily relinquish

power. Given his failing popularity, a showdown, sooner or later, is more than probable. Stay tuned.

- Write to O'Grady@wsj.com¹

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(1) <mailto:O'Grady@wsj.com>

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