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aoppenheimer@MiamiHerald.com

SAN SALVADOR -- This week's failure by most Latin American countries to speak out against Venezuela's censorship of its oldest nationwide television network at the Organization of American States' annual meeting in Panama marked a serious setback for freedom of the press -- and democracy -- in the region.

In one of the most blatant displays of disdain for democratic freedoms, three countries -- Nicaragua, Bolivia and Ecuador -- not only failed to denounce Venezuela's narcissist-Leninist President Hugo Chávez's decision not to renew the license of the RCTV network, but openly applauded it. Nicaragua's president, Daniel Ortega, even visited Caracas and personally congratulated Chávez for his decision to silence the network.

Caribbean countries, which increasingly depend on Chávez's oil subsidies, remained silent. What is more difficult to understand was the failure of Latin America's biggest countries -- Mexico, Brazil and Argentina -- to mention the RCTV case in their speeches at the OAS meeting. All three countries have had authoritarian governments or military dictatorships in their not too distant past, and at least Mexico and Argentina make a big deal about their commitment to human rights.

"Only two countries made a clear reference to the importance of freedom of expression, the United States and El Salvador," Salvadoran Foreign Minister Francisco Lainez told me upon returning to his country from the OAS meeting. "I'm sort of disappointed that there weren't more countries that raised their voices."

EXPLAINING A DECISION

Diplomats of the countries that remained silent say they could not make an explicit reference to the RCTV case at the OAS meeting because Venezuela -- as a sovereign country -- has the legal right not to renew television licenses.

In addition, they say, the RCTV case has been presented in recent days to the OAS Human Rights Commission, where it will be investigated.

Finally, they say the OAS meeting was to discuss alternative energy sources, and that U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's speech requesting an OAS mission to Venezuela to look into the RCTV case is something that Washington must now present officially in writing, so it can be discussed at the OAS' regular sessions at the group's headquarters in Washington.

But these arguments are sounding pretty weak.

First, Chávez's decision not to renew RCTV's license was an openly political move: Chávez himself announced five months before RCTV's May 27 shutdown that he would not renew the network's license because of its news coverage during a 2002 coup attempt.

Most importantly, Chávez shut down RCTV -- which had been on the air for 53 years -- without calling for a public bidding. Chávez simply took over the network and turned it into another pro-government mouthpiece, in what was an effective government takeover of a private network.

Now, Chávez controls most nationwide television networks, and the ones that remain in private hands -- except for Globovisión, which is on cable and doesn't have a nationwide reach -- are self-censoring their news.

Venezuela's television has become a one-man show.

What could Latin America's democracies have done? Under OAS rules, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina and other countries could have perfectly well expressed their alarm over Venezuela's assault on freedom of the press, citing the group's 2001 Democratic Charter. In its Article 4, it says that "freedom of expression and of the press" are "fundamental components" of the regional treaty.

WEAK RESOLUTION

In the end, the OAS meeting adopted a wishy-washy resolution in support of freedom of the press, but without mentioning either Venezuela or the RCTV issue by name.

My conclusion: This is the first time since the right-wing military dictatorships in the 1970s that I have seen a group of Latin American countries -- Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua -- applaud a measure to censor the press with no outcry from the region's biggest democracies. Worse, the OAS meeting appointed a Venezuelangovernment nominee as one of the seven members of the OAS Human Rights Commission.

The presidents of Ecuador, Bolivia and Nicaragua are already threatening independent media whose messages they don't like.

Now, after this week's sorry spectacle in Panama, they will feel more emboldened than ever.


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