

Rising censorship among world's oil powers

Venezuela's move to shut down a major TV station parallels recent crackdowns in Iran and Russia.

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MEXICO CITY - More than two-thirds of the Venezuelan population approve of President Hugo Chávez as a visionary leader for Latin America's poor.

But on Radio Caracas Television (RCTV), a different portrait emerges. In the daily morning show "The Interview," the Venezuelan leader is ridiculed as "that guy" who should be "thrown out" before he becomes a dictator.

Now, after more than 50 years on the air, Mr. Chávez is pulling the plug on RCTV. The government won't renew its broadcast license, which expires Sunday.

To Chávez supporters, closing the station rids the nation of a source of lies and political manipulation. But the move is also generating massive street protests and worldwide claims of censorship. For Chávez critics, it represents a move toward authoritarianism they say is playing out across the globe. Democratically elected leaders – particularly "petroleum populists" in Venezuela, Russia, and Iran – attack dissent by targeting independent media and civil society groups, say analysts.

The crackdowns are spurred by fears of Western governments or outside groups meddling in domestic politics or undermining security. They span countries rich and poor. But several years of high oil prices are particularly emboldening the leaders in some countries.

"Venezuela, Iran, and Russia are part of a syndrome in which oil-rich countries that already have a tendency toward authoritarianism are suddenly enjoying a new kind of political self-confidence," says Thomas Carothers, vice president of international politics and governance at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "They are suddenly sitting pretty, able to buy off opponents – gain the popularity of the public by giving out money. The concentration of oil wealth is increasing their concentration of political power ... and whatever repressive instincts they have are magnified as they strike against independent voices."

In Venezuela, RCTV is the country's oldest privately run television station, founded in 1953. Today it is not the only opposition voice, but it is one of the most widely broadcast. Chávez accuses RCTV of supporting a failed 2002 coup against him. The station ran cartoons instead of airing images of supporters marching for his return. A 1987 decree, the Chávez government maintains, gives the government the right to let the license lapse.

"The radio-electric spectrum is property of the nation; it is not an unlimited entity," says Luis Britto Garcia, a pro-government political analyst in Caracas. "[The station] broke the laws of the concession; they cut the signal during a speech by the president during the coup, they broadcast programming 24 hours a day calling on the people to overthrow the government...."

Russia: A Top 10 'free-speech backslider'

Instances of media crackdowns are spurred by local contexts but are part of a growing repression of various forms of public dissent, including nongovernmental organizations. In Russia last week, local authorities took steps they apparently believed would limit the public relations damage to an EU-Russia summit in Samara: police arrested organizers of a protest by the opposition "Other Russia" movement as well as journalists who had been trying to interview

them. They also raided the Samara offices of the opposition newspaper Novaya Gazeta, seizing computers and blocking publication of the paper's Monday edition. While those arrested were quickly released, it was a reminder of wider official crackdowns on Russia's few remaining independent journalistic voices.

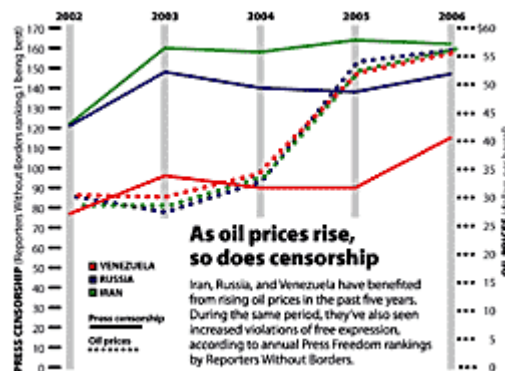
But likely to get more attention here at Monday's World Congress of Journalists is the announced eviction of Russia's 100,000-member journalists' union from its offices to make way for the state-funded RIA-Novosti's English cable news network, Russia Today.

"Today the electronic media is mostly in the hands of the state. From the pluralism of the 1990s, we have arrived at near-complete uniformity," says Mikhail Melnikov, an analyst with the Moscow-based Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations, an independent NGO. "The only thing demanded of journalists is loyalty to the authorities. The zone of criticism has become so narrow that the population is no longer in a position to understand what's going on in the country."

The Washington-based Freedom House reported earlier this month that Russia fell six places, to the 165th spot, in the group's annual rankings of political freedom. The report noted that although Russia's constitution provides for press freedom, "authorities are able to use the legislative and judicial systems to harass and prosecute independent journalists." The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists concurred, identifying Russia last week as one of 10 top "backsliders" on press freedoms.

Moises Naim, the editor and publisher of Foreign Policy magazine, says that such press censorship has evolved from a "heavy hand of the state that directly takes over operations" to a more indirect form, he says, that often takes the shape of scrutiny by tax authorities or by economic boycotts. Last year, his magazine published "The First Law of Petropolitics," an article by Thomas Friedman, positing that "the price of oil and the pace of freedom always move in opposite directions in oil-rich petrolist states." But he says that press censorship is not restricted to oil-rich nations – that repression is as intense in Argentina as it is in Venezuela, for example.

Still, Christopher Walker at Freedom House, says that the stakes are raised in states such as Russia or Iran, with weak institutions, when there are booms in energy cycles. "It gives regimes that are not inclined to play by the rules the resources to have a freer hand," he says. "It opens the doors for authorities and other power holders to steal resources."



Iran cracks down on academics

Press freedom is usually one of the first rights to be curbed, Mr. Walker says, but all types of freedoms are at stake. In Iran, recent crackdowns under conservative President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad have only sporadically focused on the media.

But Iran's intelligence services are now targeting academics and other activists with ties to the West, on the pretext that they are receiving some of the \$75 million earmarked by the US Congress for "pro-democracy" activities.

On Monday, for example, charges were published against Haleh Esfandiari, a dual Iran-US citizen who directs the Mideast program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington. She has been in Iranian custody since Dec. 30. Iran also has reportedly detained Kian Tajbakhsh, a consultant for philanthropist George Soros's Open Society Institute.

The US funding is part of the continuing "civil society" support that is credited with enabling the "democratic revolutions" in Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine. Russia, Belarus, and now Iran have sought to pre-empt Western influence by clamping down on civil society groups.

Iran's Intelligence Ministry accused Mrs. Esfandiari of helping set up a secret network with the Open Society Institute to undermine the regime. "The long-term and final goal of such centers is to try to enable this network to confront the ruling powers," the ministry said in a statement. Some in Iran see the moves not as a clamp on freedom of expression but a matter of domestic security.

In Russia, where no one claims that press controls have returned to the Soviet model of total subservience, pro-Kremlin experts blame local journalists for not taking advantage of their legal freedoms. "Any media outlet has a choice whether to be independent or not. Some, such as the [Moscow radio station] Ekho Moskvi, or Novaya Gazeta, are criticizing [President Vladimir] Putin in a harsh way, and they survive," says Boris Reznik, a member of the pro-Kremlin United Russia Party and deputy head of the State Duma's commission on information policy. "But other journalists don't want to be free; they'd rather earn a lot of money and take state subsidies."

Meanwhile, in Caracas, more protests over the closure of RCTV are expected this weekend. But few expect Chávez to back down. Like many leaders, he doesn't need to, says Michael Shifter, vice president for policy at the Inter-American Dialogue. "The move will hurt his international reputation, but it's damage he judges he can weather," says Mr. Shifter. "It's because oil prices are so high [that] these oil-producing countries feel they can get away with a lot and take steps to silence the press. Neighboring countries would hesitate to criticize them since they need their oil."