

Chávez's Move Against Critic Highlights Shift in Media

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CARACAS, [Venezuela](#), May 26 — Arturo Sarmiento speaks upper-crust English polished at Sandhurst, Britain's aristocratic military school. He made fortunes trading oil and importing whiskey. Now Mr. Sarmiento, just 35 and a staunch supporter of President [Hugo Chávez](#), owns an expanding television network here.

As tempers flare around Mr. Chávez's decision not to renew the license of RCTV, the nation's oldest broadcaster and a vocal critic, effectively shutting it down on Sunday, a new media elite is emerging. It is made up of ideological devotees to Mr. Chávez, senior government officials and tycoons like Mr. Sarmiento.

That is a marked contrast with the state of the news media when Mr. Chávez's rule began in 1999. Then, the industry was largely privately owned by moneyed interests hostile to Mr. Chávez. His supporters say that old guard — as partisan as newspapers in the early United States — sought to derail his actions during much of his presidency.

“With the polarization that's befallen Venezuela, media organizations have been used to cause political change,” Mr. Sarmiento said in a recent interview. He says his ambitions for TeleCaribe, a private broadcaster he bought last year, are different: to provide programming tailored to regional audiences in Venezuela. “Media vehicles should not be engaged in politics,” he said.

Mr. Chávez has dueled with opponents in the news media while fortifying news organizations loyal to him. For instance, newspapers favorable to the government have received nearly 12 times more government advertising, said Andrés Cañizález, a researcher at Andrés Bello University, citing a study of four leading dailies.

“Previous administrations in Venezuela also used advertising as a way to consolidate media support,” Mr. Cañizález said. “The difference now is that the government has made growing its own

media operations and combating its opponents in the media central elements of its political strategy.”

In what may point to a rare example of widespread disagreement with the popular president, recent polls show that most Venezuelans oppose Mr. Chávez’s decision not to renew RCTV’s license.

Thousands of people marched through downtown here on Saturday to RCTV’s headquarters to show support for the network, following a protest by opposing groups late Friday in front of Globovisión, another dissident network, that left that its building and neighboring buildings painted with pro-Chávez slogans.

The RCTV move has rallied the president’s base. Anti-RCTV graffiti covers walls throughout Caracas alongside criticism of President Bush, whom Mr. Chávez regularly derides. Mr. Chávez has described RCTV as “putschist,” with his disdain for the network intensifying since a group of military officers briefly ousted him in 2002.

The president accuses RCTV and other private broadcasters of supporting what amounted to a 48-hour coup. In RCTV’s case, the government says the network colluded with the coup’s conspirators by conducting a news blackout after Mr. Chávez’s removal and broadcasting cartoons when he returned to office two days later.

As Mr. Chávez’s political power has grown, with loyalists controlling the Supreme Court, the national assembly and most state governments, RCTV has remained critical of Mr. Chávez. Two other nationwide broadcasters, Televen and Venevisión, have curtailed critical coverage. Globovisión, the cable news channel that drew the anger of pro-Chávez groups on Friday, remains critical of Mr. Chávez but is viewed by a relatively small part of the population.

Mr. Chávez’s partisans often say critical coverage of the government illustrates elitist and racist sentiments, while dissidents say the news media are their only outlet for expression, since other institutions are controlled by Mr. Chávez.

Meanwhile, changes in the criminal code and new legislation have raised defamation penalties and enhanced the government’s ability

to intimidate critics through legal action while Mr. Chávez has created an array of new state media ventures. When he was first elected, the government had just one television station and two radio stations. Now there are four new television stations controlled by central and regional governments and seven new radio broadcasters.