

Venezuela Police Repel Protests Over TV Network's Closing

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CARACAS, [Venezuela](#), May 27 — With little more than an hour to go late Sunday until this country's oldest television network was to be taken off the air after 53 years of broadcasting, the police dispersed thousands of protesters by firing tear gas into demonstrations against the measure.

The police said that shots were fired in their direction and that protesters hurling rocks had injured 11 officers. Local television showed images of policemen with guns drawn patrolling a highway that had been closed near one demonstration. Protesters in other areas of the city burned tires, apparently eliciting the police reaction.

Groups that support President [Hugo Chávez](#) also flooded a central area of Caracas to celebrate his decision not to renew the broadcasting license of Radio Caracas Televisión, or RCTV, which has been one of his most vocal critics.

RCTV's signal will be transferred to a new state broadcasting company, part of a growing array of state and private media ventures that are supportive of Mr. Chávez.

The president has defended the RCTV decision, saying that the network supported a coup that briefly removed him from office in 2002.

RCTV's news programs regularly deride Mr. Chávez's Socialist-inspired transformation of Venezuelan society. "RCTV lacks respect for the Venezuelan people," said Onán Mauricio Aristigueta, 46, a messenger at the National Assembly who showed up to support the president.

Mr. Chávez has left untouched the operations of other private broadcasters who were also critical of him at the time of the 2002 coup but who have changed editorial policies to stop criticizing his government. That has led Mr. Chávez's critics to claim that the move

to allow RCTV's license to expire amounts to a stifling of dissent in the news media.

"The other channels don't say anything," said Elisa Parejo, 69, an actress who was one of RCTV's first soap opera stars. "What we're living in Venezuela is a monstrosity," she said at RCTV's headquarters on Sunday, as employees gathered for an on-air remembrance of the network's history. "It is a dictatorship."

El Nacional, a daily newspaper here that remains critical of Mr. Chávez, greeted readers on Sunday with a front-page editorial set against a blackened background, describing the RCTV decision as "the end of pluralism" in the country.

The Inter-American Press Association joined other nongovernmental groups over the weekend in condemning the RCTV decision. Gonzalo Marroquín, the president of the association, said in a statement that the RCTV move was intended to "standardize the right to information, and results in a very bleak outlook for the whole hemisphere."

María Alejandra Díaz, the social responsibility director at the Communications Ministry, cited recent legislation in Venezuela that enabled the government to shut down media groups for 72 hours if their coverage incited people to engage in violent protests. Ms. Díaz asked news organizations to refrain from reporting on the association's statement, since it could allow viewers, readers or listeners to think Mr. Chávez's government was "tyrannical."