

Venezuelan protests bring a subtle shift

Student protests didn't lead to the return of RCTV, but many say the political climate may not be the same for Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez.

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CARACAS --

Two weeks into student protests over the government's closure of the popular -- and anti-government -- TV station RCTV, the political tussle between leftist President Hugo Chávez and the student leadership has turned to apparent stalemate, although some things may never be the same again.

The students admit they will eventually have to return to the classroom. "But even if they go silent tomorrow," says Roberto de Vries, a psychologist who has studied the issue of leadership, the students "have sown some very important seeds."

According to de Vries, one of the key differences between the student leadership and previous movements that have stood up to Chávez is that they represent an appeal to consensus, in a society marked by polarization over Chávez's rule.

This is not a view shared by the government, which regards the student protesters as rich kids acting out a coup script written in Washington. In a 3 ½-hour speech Thursday evening -- which all domestic radio and TV stations were obliged to transmit live -- Chávez said the students were merely "pawns of imperialism."

He said the government's program to expand higher education -- including 28 new institutions by 2012 -- had "private education sectors and the elites of the public universities worried." He also promised a new higher education law by the end of this year, and instructed his followers to create student councils that would by-pass existing student bodies.

"His language was extremely aggressive against the . . . universities," said Violeta Rojo, a literature professor at the Simón Bolívar University. "What I foresee is government intervention, which is what Chávez has always wanted."

UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY

The president, Rojo said, portrays university autonomy -- which gives institutions the right to run their own affairs, despite government funding -- as "freedom to do whatever we want -- where in fact it just means academic freedom."

"Chávez wants all the universities to teach the same thing," student protester Juan Carlos Senior said. The fear of an end to university autonomy -- a tradition in Latin America, but one that governments have often sought to undermine -- also underlies the current wave of protests.

Despite the inconvenience they often cause, the student street protests have retained widespread support, with polls still showing about eight out of 10 Venezuelans opposed to RCTV's closure.

"As far as I'm concerned, it's fine that they march," said Patricia Olmos, a hotel cleaner, "so the president can see there are people protesting."

RCTV, a channel mostly devoted to soap operas and variety shows of the kind the government says promote "the anti-values of capitalism," was replaced with a sixth government-run channel called TVes, and has resulted in a backlash that transcends class divisions.

"Where I live, we only get Channel 2 [the former RCTV frequency]," said Olmos, 46. "So about four months ago we got cable, knowing that this was going to happen."

A fan of movies more than soap operas, she complains that TVes is totally out-of-date. "As far as I'm concerned it's a step back," she said. "It's like we used to get on state TV when I was a kid."

OUTDATED CHANNEL

Student protester Elisa Donadi admits to missing her favorite soap, *My Cousin Ciela*. "It's a very Latin American thing," she said. "They're not just depriving us of entertainment, we identify with the characters."

For de Vries, soap operas are part of the way Venezuelans see the world.

"I meet people from all backgrounds who say, 'I don't want to die just yet -- I have to see how this [political crisis] all ends.'"

De Vries says the closure of RCTV, "had an impact on people's emotions -- it was like an emotional trigger."

No one, however, can answer the question that's on everyone's lips: What happens next?

Senior, a 21-year-old student of administration at the Metropolitan University in Caracas, says it's obvious the protests will not restore RCTV to the airwaves. But he is equally sure that things will no longer be the same.

Issues like the reform of the constitution to allow Chávez indefinite reelection, may meet with stiff resistance.

"Faced with any future decision," Senior said, "the government will have to think twice. They know the students are not going to just take things lying down."