

US attacks Venezuela: “press freedom” as a pretext for intervention

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US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice Monday used the opening of the general assembly of the Organization of American States in Panama City to launch another US propaganda attack against the left nationalist government of President Hugo Chavez in Venezuela.

Seizing upon the government’s decision not to renew the broadcast license of RCTV, a Venezuelan television channel that was intimately involved in the abortive US-backed coup against Chavez in April 2002, Rice called upon the OAS to launch an immediate investigation into the decision and the state of freedom of expression in Venezuela.

Rice declared: “Freedom of expression, freedom of association and freedom of conscience are not a thorn in the side of government. Disagreeing with your government is not unpatriotic and most certainly should not be a crime in any country, especially a democracy.”

Venezuela’s foreign minister, Nicolas Maduro, rejected the attack, denouncing Washington for violating his country’s sovereignty and ridiculing Rice for lecturing Venezuela about human rights. “The OAS should form a special commission to study the daily violation of human rights on the southern border of the United States,” he said. He continued, “How many prisoners do they have in Guantanamo? Where did they kidnap them?”

Speaking in Prague on Tuesday, President Bush also singled Venezuela out for attack. “In Venezuela, elected leaders have resorted to shallow populism to dismantle democratic institutions and tighten their grip on power,” he said.

The attack on Venezuela has also been joined by the US Senate, which passed a resolution—supported by the two Democratic presidential front-runners, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama—in defense of RCTV.

Various human rights organizations have joined the chorus, including the dubious organization Reporters Without Borders, which receives a substantial amount of its funding from the National Endowment for Democracy, the agency set up by Washington to carry out political operations previously handled by the CIA.

Washington’s concern with press freedom is highly selective. It is worth pointing out that the hue and cry it has raised over the fate of RCTV is joined by a virtual silence over the wholesale attack on the media by one of its key allies in the “war on terrorism.” Pakistani dictator Gen. Pervez Musharraf issued a decree Monday giving his government blanket power to shut down any independent television network. The regime has systematically blocked the transmission of TV stations that have reported on the growing constitutional crisis over Musharraf’s sacking of Pakistan’s chief justice.

The hypocrisy of the Bush administration’s supposed devotion to press freedom was spelled out clearly in a State Department briefing

Monday. The department’s spokesman denounced “the non-democratic actions that the Venezuelan Government has taken,” called for RCTV to be “reopened” and extolled the street demonstrations organized largely by right-wing anti-government parties as a fight for “democracy.”

Asked just minutes later about the suppression of the press in Pakistan, the spokesman was exceedingly circumspect, allowing only that Washington is “watching it closely.” He continued, “This is an issue that the Pakistani people and the Pakistani Government need to resolve within the confines of their law.”

Yet this is precisely what was done in Venezuela. Matters were resolved under an existing law, which empowers the government to grant or deny privately owned broadcast corporations the right to use public airwaves to the extent that it benefits the public. RCTV has not been disbanded, nor have its directors been arrested or its equipment confiscated. Its license expired and was not renewed. Instead, the channel was given to a new public television station, TVes—Venezuela Social Television.

It is also worth noting that the government of Alan Garcia in Peru, less than two months ago, yanked the broadcasting licenses of two TV stations and three radio stations, apparently because of their support for a strike. Again, no outcry from Washington.

That RCTV, known more for its soap operas (*telenovelas*) and game shows than political commentary, should be denied the renewal of its license is hardly an assault on the freedom of the press. The channel is free to continue broadcasting its programming over cable or satellite, but not to use the public airwaves. Moreover, the company still retains broadcast rights for two radio stations.

The real question is why this station was not shut down earlier and why its leading personnel were not arrested and brought to trial and why similar treatment was not meted out to other broadcasters who continue to enjoy the license denied to RCTV.

RCTV is part of a closely interlocking network of media corporations that are owned by and reflect the interests of Venezuela’s financial and landowning oligarchy.

The principal reason cited by the government in refusing to renew RCTV’s license was the channel’s actions during right-wing coup backed by the Bush administration that briefly ousted Chavez—the country’s popularly elected president—and brought in a junta of military officers and business leaders. The coup was launched on April 11, 2002 on the pretext of alleged government suppression of anti-government demonstrators, and was ended two days later in the face of a massive rebellion by Venezuelan workers and layers of the oppressed opposed to the junta. Chavez, who had been taken prisoner by coup leaders, was released and placed back in the presidential

palace.

It should be recalled that Washington made no attempt to conceal its satisfaction over the coup it had helped prepare, declaring the junta that briefly replaced Chavez to be legitimate and making not a peep of protest as it abolished the constitution, disbanded the National Assembly and, not incidentally, forcibly shut down television, radio and print media deemed supportive of the Chavez government.

The government order denying RCTV the renewal of its broadcasting license cited its “active participation in the coup of April 2002” and its “stimulation of acts of sabotage of the national economy.”

The station played a direct supporting role in the illegal overthrow of an elected government. First, it deliberately broadcast a false account of the events that were utilized as the pretext for the coup, the clashes between an opposition-organized protest (actively promoted by RCTV) and supporters of the Chavez government on April 11, 2002. Gunfire that claimed the lives of at least 18 people and wounded another 150 was portrayed as the work of pro-Chavez gunmen, when in fact snipers had fired on the crowd defending the presidential palace against the opposition demonstration.

The station then reported that Chavez had voluntarily resigned, when it was well known to the station’s owners that the Venezuelan president had been illegally arrested and was being held prisoner at a military base. Throughout the April events, the station turned itself into a propaganda facility for the coup’s organizers and supporters.

Then, when hundreds of thousands of Venezuelan working people took to the streets to oppose the coup and demand Chavez’s reinstatement, RCTV systematically blacked out the news, instead broadcasting cartoons and old movies.

When the opposition, again with backing from Washington, staged an employers strike and shutdown of the oil industry in late 2002 and early 2003, RCTV again openly promoted the actions.

In point of fact, RCTV’s behavior differs little if at all from that of the other major private television broadcasters in Venezuela, including Venevision, owned by the Cuban-Venezuelan communications magnate Gustavo Cisneros, and Globovision, the Venezuelan affiliate of CNN, which in April 2002 turned over its airwaves to Admiral Hector Ramirez, then chief of the Venezuelan navy, to broadcast an appeal to all military personnel to join the coup. Both of them retain their broadcast licenses.

Venevision—which stands to gain significantly from RCTV’s loss—reached an understanding with the Chavez government that it would cease direct agitation for its overthrow. RCTV rejected talks with the government and maintained its open hostility. Globovision has also come under fire from the Chavez government, which charges that it is using subliminal programming to promote anti-government actions and even the assassination of the president.

Polls have indicated that a majority of the Venezuelan people opposed the shutdown of RCTV, and the right-wing opposition has seized upon the issue in an attempt to resuscitate the movement to overthrow the government. In the week since the station was taken off the air there have been a number of student demonstrations, organized and directed in large measure by the opposition parties. A number of these have degenerated into riots and battles with police.

The opposition is able to agitate on the question of “freedom of expression” in relation to RCTV primarily because the Chavez government waited for more than five years before taking action against the company for its role in the 2002 coup. Similarly, it has failed until now to prosecute any of those who were responsible for

the attempted overthrow. The rejection of bringing the coup organizers to account in favor of a policy of “reconciliation” and “dialogue” with the right is the clearest measure of the class nature of the Chavez government.

While Chavez’s social reforms and program of limited nationalizations have enjoyed broad popular support, he heads a bourgeois nationalist government that rests in the final analysis upon sections of Venezuela’s capitalist ruling elite and the army. His socialist pretensions notwithstanding, all the essential institutions of the capitalist state—the army, parliament and government bureaucracies—remain intact, while the principal economic levers of power, particularly finance capital, remain in the hands of Venezuela’s traditional ruling oligarchy.

The lessons of Latin American history are clear. To the extent that the masses of Venezuelan working people place their confidence in this government to defeat another coup attempt, they face enormous dangers.

It should be recalled that the campaign of CIA destabilization in Chile, culminating in 1973 with one of the bloodiest coups in the region’s history, began with a trumped-up campaign in defense of “freedom of the press” centered around the right-wing daily *El Mercurio*—the flagship of a network of newspapers, radio stations and ad agencies. The CIA funneled millions into the paper, using it as an outlet for disinformation and anti-government propaganda, while at the same time coordinating an international campaign denouncing the government of President Salvador Allende for its supposed suppression of “freedom of expression,” a spurious charge stemming from a cutoff of government advertising and labor disputes at the paper.

The current US-generated uproar over RCTV has all the earmarks of a similar destabilization campaign. There can be no question that Washington’s ultimate aim is the imposition of a puppet regime that will guarantee American energy conglomerates unrestricted control over Venezuela’s vast oil and natural gas reserves. To that end, it will seek once again to promote coups and ultimately prepare direct US military intervention.

Defeating such threats is possible only through the revolutionary political mobilization of the Venezuelan working class, independently of the Chavez government.



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