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HEADLINE: Venezuelan Emigres Find Common Ground in Anger

BYLINE: Pamela Constable; Washington Post Staff Writer

BODY:

It was a tiny gesture of protest: a dozen college students flagging down cars for an hour on Embassy Row this month, wearing symbolic white gags across their mouths and holding up posters that quoted Albert Camus and Walt Whitman on the importance of free speech.

But the anger of these Venezuela-born young people -- furious at the shutdown of a popular private TV channel in Caracas -- reflected the fast-rising political fervor that is gripping Venezuelan immigrants in the United States after years of private frustration over the tightening revolutionary grip of President **Hugo Chavez**.

"I want to go back to a country where I am free to criticize and express my thoughts, but the government is trying to change the laws and indoctrinate the population," said Merquit Garcia, 21, an American University student who attended the protest. "Venezuela is divided now. Half the people see Cuba as a model, and half see it as a threat," she said. "The future is very unclear."

In Venezuela, the recent forced closure of Radio Caracas Television has convulsed the oil-rich South American nation, leading to massive street protests and sharpening the class divisions that Chavez's socialist policies and defiant anti-Americanism have been creating since he came to power in 1999.

In the Washington region, where a few thousand Venezuelan immigrants have long blended into quiet suburbs and professional settings, dozens of prominent refugees from the Chavez era have joined the community. In Miami, where tens of thousands of Venezuelans have built an active and influential enclave, the crisis in Caracas, the country's capital, has unleashed a parallel frenzy of meetings, protests and preparations to receive a small but growing wave of political refugees.

Virginia Contreras, a resident of Germantown, is a former Venezuelan judge and diplomat for the Chavez government. In 2001, she quit as Venezuela's representative to the Organization of American States and has become an outspoken critic of Chavez's rule, which she says has steadily eroded democratic freedoms while proclaiming itself to be a champion of the poor and a prototype of modern socialism.

"It is not just a bad government; it is a totalitarian government," said Contreras, 49, who often visits Miami and Caracas to work with opposition groups.

She called Chavez a "snake charmer" who is trying to create a "constitutional dictatorship" but is increasingly alienating the public. The closure of Radio Caracas Television, she said, "touched something vital. Now everyone can see what he is trying to do."

Venezuela's ambassador in Washington, Bernardo Alvarez, said that the TV station's closure has been misunderstood and that freedom of expression is a "pillar" of Venezuelan democracy. Venezuelan officials accused the TV station of collaborating with Chavez opponents during a short-lived coup in 2002.

"There is clearly a debate in Venezuela, but the media should not abuse public space for anti-democratic actions or to work to destabilize the government," Alvarez said.

Alvarez said that the Chavez government had no intention of creating another Cuba and that foreign critics were viewing its policies through a distorted prism. "They need to take off their Cold War lenses and get new ones that reflect the new reality" of Latin American politics, he said in a telephone interview Monday from Panama.

Chavez has built an enormous following among Venezuela's poor, who have benefited from his assistance programs and been inspired by his rhetoric of social transformation. Among affluent citizens, however, the fear of a Cuban-style revolution has grown steadily, prompting a surge in political refugees from a country that historically has produced very few.

Since 2004, 3,778 Venezuelans have applied for asylum in the United States, and nearly half their cases have been approved, according to U.S. immigration officials. In the three years before Chavez took office, there were 328 applications, and fewer than 20 percent were approved.

An estimated 300,000 Venezuelan immigrants, students, refugees and their families live in the United States.

"Some of them have been persecuted directly, and others are fleeing the system that makes them less free," said Elio Aponte, a former Venezuelan scientist and software company official. He lives in Miami and heads an exile organization that helps new arrivals apply for asylum, usually after landing at Miami International Airport. Most Venezuelans arrive there on tourist visas. "We are helping 80 to 100 people every month,

and more are coming every day," Apontesaid.

Miami is also a longtime nerve center of Cuban exile politics, and Venezuela's problems have resonated sharply within its Cuban community. U.S. Rep. Lincoln Diaz-Balart, a Florida Republican and Cuban emigre, has asked the Bush administration to offer Venezuelan refugees the same fast-track rights to asylum that Cubans have received for years.

There is no indication that such a legal change will be made, however, and relations between Caracas and Washington, though strained, are more complex than the entrenched hostility between the United States and Fidel Castro's Cuba. For one thing, the United States is a major consumer of Venezuelan oil, the country's major resource.

Moreover, human rights groups in the United States, although strongly critical of the media crackdown and other steps by Chavez, have stopped short of labeling him a dictator. They describe his regime as systematically politicizing state institutions and weakening the rule of law but not as using official violence to quash dissent.

"People in Venezuela do not get killed or disappeared like in Colombia or put in prison for exercising free speech like in Cuba," said Jos? Miguel Vivanco, a Washington-based official of the group Human Rights Watch. He said that the Chavez government had used the court system to harass opponents and that the TV shutdown was "a very serious setback," but that there was still room for opposition groups to function. "We should not jump to the stereotype that this is a one-party or totalitarian system," he said.

But from the viewpoint of exiled officials such as Luis Giusti, the former head of Venezuela's national oil company who lives in Washington, the Chavez revolution has destroyed his country's institutions and is well on the way to snuffing out its democratic traditions.

"It is a national tragedy," Giusti said in his office at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

And for students such as Carla Bustillos, 27, who is studying law at American University, the recent shutdown of Radio Caracas Television was a shocking act that propelled her into action.

"I grew up in a democracy, and so did my parents," she said while picketing outside the Venezuelan Embassy on June 1. "We grew up watching RCTV. Then on Sunday night, the screen suddenly switched to an imposed socialist channel. That's why we are protesting. If we lose the freedom of speech, everyone, including Chavez supporters, will lose it, too."

GRAPHIC: IMAGE; By Michael Williamson -- The Washington Post; Virginia Contreras, a former Venezuelan diplomat for Hugo Chavez's government who now lives in Germantown, straightens a Venezuelan flag in her window. Now a critic of Chavez,

she says he has eroded democracy.
IMAGE

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