

El Salvador's Media Favour a Right-Wing Status Quo

El Salvador has been governed by the Nationalist Republic Alliance (ARENA) for 16 years, a mandate unequalled in all of Latin America. A key element favouring the ARENA dynasty has been a mass media supportive of the right-wing party, largely through the shared interests of the business sector, media moguls and the government. The media companies with the biggest circulation in El Salvador are owned by businessmen whose capital comes from other economic activities which influence the media's content and coverage.

According to journalist Juan Jose Dalton, 'the coffee, cotton and sugar oligarchies have modernised, and represent an elite that dominates both the banking and financial systems, trade and the media'.

Journalists and analysts agree that popular mainstream media in El Salvador provides information influenced by ideological, political and business bias that favours the interests of the owners and advertisers. As a result, the media has played an important role in consolidating the relationship between the business sector and the government.

A recent study by the Salvadoran Foundation for Economic and Social Development (FUSADES) stresses the need for a more independent media. The report, *Democratic Institutions in El Salvador: Performance Assessment and Consolidation Plans*, is highly critical of the democratic state of the country's institutions and underlines the need for changes in the media as fundamental to the process of democratisation.

Manuel Castillo, coordinator of the anti-corruption organisation Probidad, accused the media of bias in its coverage of corruption, elections and globalisation, which constantly favour the interests of the economic elite. Probidad is developing the Journalism Observatory project with the aim of providing an analysis of the country's media. Castillo explained that the initial stage of the project involved discussions with journalists regarding the limitations they face. 'What emerged was the partiality of the media regarding corruption, coverage of the 2004 presidential elections and the Central America Free Trade Agreement with the US (DR-CAFTA) negotiations.' In the case of the elections, media coverage shamelessly favoured the ARENA candidate, while DR-CAFTA negotiations were relentlessly presented in a positive light.

While Castillo reported that certain improvements had occurred following recommendations from the Journalism Observatory project, Dalton reported the persistence of 'untouchable interests' such as the airline company TACA, the main banks, telephone and electricity companies. El

Salvador is the only Latin American country where the ruling party has been in power for over 15 years. However, the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) has been gaining popularity over the past decade; in the 2004 elections, the Party won 80 municipalities, and it currently controls local governments serving nearly half of the population.

The distance between national and local politics could be attributed to the media's influence on a national scale: highlighting the advantages of a US-friendly government and continuing to use wartime language when referring to the FMLN. Meanwhile, local candidates with direct access to voters are able to explain their positions more effectively. The role of the national media might also account for the seeming contradiction between the country's economic situation and popular perceptions of President Antonio Saca.

In an opinion poll conducted in June 2005 by the Central American University 'Jose Simeon Canas' regarding the first year of the Saca administration, 55.1% of those questioned believed the country's economic situation to have deteriorated under the Saca government, while perversely, his management of the country scored 6.6 out of 10 – a high figure compared to first-year scores of previous ARENA administrations. Forty-nine per cent of those interviewed believed the President to be manipulated by other sectors while 62.1% expressed the need for change within the country.

Meanwhile, 44.7% believed that the President's popularity was a result of the government's media campaign. Maria Silvia Guillen, director of the Foundation for Studies for Application of Law (FESPAD), told CAR that the contradiction of the President's popularity and the country's worsening situation can only be explained by misinformation by the media. 'The President's image remains positive despite increasing concern over issues such as insecurity, unemployment and poverty... the biased coverage prevents people from recognising the reality in which they live.'

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