

Another Media Empresario for President? the case of El Salvador

Camilo Zamora

The history of the “media-politics” relationship isn’t alien to Central America, much less El Salvador where the media have long played an important role in local political life. The alliance of the mainstream Salvadorean media with the right-wing has characterised the last 15 years of this relationship, with the ARENA party staying in power thanks to the strength of support from the television, radio and press. The last three presidential elections have shown the ARENA candidate ten times more than the opposition, not only in advertisements, but in interviews, profiles and news coverage.



The Government, in return, has recompensed the media in no small way. Millions of dollars in advertising budgets is one way of saying “thankyou”. The media which support the government and the ARENA party get the most of the governmental advertising budget; the critical media, such as the Co-Latino newspaper, run by a cooperative of journalists, and Channel 12, receive for their labours in independent journalism a complete boycott, not only economically but also in terms of information.

In an effort to make life easier for the media barons, the government of El Salvador makes sure that public broadcasting has a low profile. Of only two state-run TV channels, one (channel 8), was given as a concession to a church association, the other (channel 10) is kept with such a low budget, and so much control, that it can’t even run a press room or news slots.

If up to now the “Media-Politics” relationship has been counterproductive for democracy in El Salvador, things are only going downhill. For the first time in history a businessman from the media sector has been named as candidate for the presidency of the republic for the ARENA party.

Antonio Elias Saca is a very well known face in El Salvador, having been a sports commentator for many years in radio and television, and having narrated four football world cups for the country’s football-mad population. While at Telecorporacion Salvadoreña he was the right-hand man of the biggest media tycoon in the country – Boris Eserki, and soon began to acquire radio stations.

Saca’s history is rather confusing, in particular the transition from sport commentator to media empresario. According to different references to his life, in 1993 Radio America became bankrupt, in which Saca was a shareholder with the Rivas Cañas family. This left Saca in bankruptcy - just one day after resigning from his work as a commentator. In his official biography it is claimed that at this moment he thought of setting up his own radio station, and was conceded the frequency to establish Radio Astral. Though he wasn’t a powerful person in 1993 he was well-connected to power. It is widely supposed that the concession of the frequency was made for favours he’d later have to pay back. After Radio Astral came La Chévere, then La Guapachosa, and Fama Estereo.

Currently Saca has nine radio stations, despite the curious names he has chosen for his stations they have been very successful in gaining audience. Saca's businesses enjoy the support of other shareholders such as René Figueroa, Congressional Deputy and director of the ARENA party.

Saca's importance as a media empresario have taken him to the presidency of the Salvadorean Association of Radio Broadcasters, ASDER, and to the presidency of the Association of Private Businessmen, the latter leading to his candidature for president.

The start of the political campaigns in El Salvador has witnessed a landslide of support for Saca. The main opposition candidate, Shafik Handal, is way down on the polls and his profile is much lower in the media. The coverage of Saca's activities is done through a chain of 50 radios together, with the support of television and press, consolidating the ARENA strategy – saturation of the media with Saca's image, and a controlled and limited space for debate or message.

Shafik Handal finds himself in the same position as the Italian opposition to Berlusconi: having to pay their opposition candidate to run a campaign.

If Saca wins, it will likely mean five more years of restricted press in El Salvador, a boycott of the television stations and newspapers that are critical of the government, and a government which favours, well, Saca's own media business.

Organisations in El Salvador recently supported by WACC

Museo de la palabra y la imagen: www.museo.com.sv

Asociación de Radios y Programas Participativos de El Salvador, ARPAS www.arpas.org.sv

See also:

Diario Co-Latino, independent cooperative-run newspaper in San Salvador:
www.diariocolatino.com