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Honduras' President Takes On Media Moguls For Access To The People

by Mike Leffert

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His popularity sinking, Honduras' President Manuel Zelaya in May ordered the country's private broadcast media to devote 10 two-hour segments to airing government programs. "We find ourselves obligated to make this decision to counteract the misinformation of the news media about our 17 months in office," said Zelaya.

Under the edict, all 500 radio stations and 100 television stations would be required to present the programming simultaneously between 10 p.m. and midnight for 10 days in a row to correct what Zelaya thought was a media bias against accurate reporting of his administration and its accomplishments. Though he was immediately attacked in the media as a Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez clone, the order was apparently legal.

The cadena, as the practice is called, is permitted by law. Although it is limited to seven minutes in duration, exceptions can be approved by the Comision Nacional de Telecomunicaciones (CONATEL). Sinea Diaz, an assistant CONATEL commissioner, said the commission gave approval. CONATEL's explanation was accepted only reluctantly. President of the legislature Roberto Micheletti said, "We are a democratic country, and we cannot interfere with private companies here. We will have to check the law to see whether he [Zelaya] has the authority to do this." They did, and Zelaya does.

President of the Honduran journalist's group Colegio de Periodistas de Honduras (CPH) Elan Reyes acknowledged the legality, but demanded the decision be revoked, saying, "In the past the system of a national channel was constantly used, principally by de facto governments, without satisfactory results and provoking a general sense of discomfort among the people." Reyes proved to be correct about the discomfort. Zelaya did not revoke the edict, but did scale it back from the start.

On the first day of the cadena, May 28, the government announced a reduction in program length from two hours to one. There followed a one-hour program on expanding telephone service. On the second day, Zelaya spoke on his intention to build hydroelectric plants and phase out oil-fired generation. It lasted only a half hour. On the third, he told the country that tax collections had risen during his first year in office and that they would rise again in 2007. That was the last of the programs.

The power of the media owners

Zelaya's frustration with the media is longstanding, but came to a head on May 6, when he said he was in a "fight with no quarter given" with the country's media owners, calling them "powerful economic groups motivated by self-interest to exploit political and social problems to provide grist

for their mills." While they went about the milling of grist, he, the president, was often left without the means to communicate with the people. The media owners are indeed powerful, and they have axes to grind.

Of the four major newspapers, El Heraldo and La Tribuna in Tegucigalpa and El Tiempo and La Prensa in San Pedro Sula, El Heraldo and La Prensa are owned by Jorge Canahuati, La Tribuna is owned by ex-President Carlos Flores (1998-2002), and El Tiempo is owned by Jaime Rosenthal, a powerful banker and politician (see NotiCen, 1998-10-29, 2002-10-17). Canahuati is close with Flores, who awarded him valuable contracts to sell arms and medicines to the government during his administration.

A 2001 report from the press organization Sala de Prensa to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) said several El Heraldo reporters were fired for criticizing Flores, including Editor in Chief Thelma Mejia. Mejia said that Flores had pressured Canahuati to fire the reporters. Although they both belong to the Partido Liberal (PL), Flores is known to distrust Zelaya. Felix Molina, assistant coordinator of ConexiHon magazine, said that Canahuati and Flores have biased coverage against Zelaya because he is a threat to the business class to which they and their advertisers belong.

Zelaya's contention that the media distort his efforts is not without merit. The reporting of violent crime is one example. In 2006, there were 3,118 homicides, enough to earn Honduras third place in Central America in the category. The media has reportedly "encouraged the public perception" that the murder rate is rising. But the number of homicides for 2006 was 3% lower than in the previous year. The president's approval numbers have declined from 70% when he took office in January 2006 to 46% in May 2007.

Inter Press Service (IPS) investigated the situation and found that Zelaya had had 34 direct confrontations with the press since assuming power, 26 in 2006 and eight in the first five months of 2007. The IPS article, as chance would have it, was written by Thelma Mejia and provided an example of the kind of brushes the president has with reporters. On May 2, a reporter asked him about his interview with US President George W. Bush. He responded, "Do you work for the FBI, the CIA, or G-2 (Honduran military intelligence)?" He then went on, "I don't rule here. I have been left only the authority to administer some things of the state, but who does rule in Honduras are some pressure groups that start campaigns in complicity with the media to destabilize me."

There seems little question that Zelaya lacks that ineffable quality of charming reporters. The papers have nearly shunned him. El Heraldo, La Tribuna, and La Prensa have not featured him in a front-page story for nearly a year. Nor have they responded to his criticisms. Coverage of his administration has, reported Mejia, usually started "on page 10 or 15." Felix Molina of ConexiHon faults Zelaya for his lack of finesse in ordering the cadenas, even while agreeing that coverage has been biased against him. "First, Zelaya escalated tensions with the media. The media claimed their opposition was about freedom of speech, but it was really a business issue," said Molina. "The president wouldn't pay them for their lost revenue, so they painted him as the Honduran Hugo Chavez. Second, Zelaya caused a huge uproar but provided very little information in the cadenas. Everyone was left asking, what was this all for?"

Marco Antonio Midence Milla, a lawyer and El Tiempo columnist, provided an analysis of the overall situation that evenhandedly blames nearly everyone. He told Central America Report, "Comparisons with Chavez are definitely out of order. Zelaya is not mistreated by the media, he just has a terrible public-relations record. Nor did the cadenas restrict freedom of expression. They were just unnecessary exercises of executive power. The population overreacted to the cadenas it doesn't understand presidential powers."

By contrast, La Tribuna columnist Jose Maria Leiva Leiva said that in his opinion the political class was responsible for all the problems in the country, that no government could change this, and that it was his duty to report it. He said this on the day Zelaya announced the cadenas. As chance would have it, he made the statement on the occasion of his receiving a prize from the Asociacion de Prensa Hondurena (APH) on the Day of the Journalist. Presenting the prize to Leiva was President Manuel Zelaya.

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