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The Fight over Control of the Dominican Republic’s Radio Waves

by Crosby Girón

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For several years, the existence of radio stations that operate without the necessary legal permits has been a problem in the Dominican Republic. However, according to reports, the Instituto Dominicano de las Telecomunicaciones (the Dominican Institute of Telecommunications, INDOTEL), is planning a crack-down on radio stations operating illegally.

The news was announced in October by INDOTEL president José Del Castillo Saviñón in the presence of Roberto Lama Sajour, president of the Asociación Dominicana de Radiodifusoras (ADORA), an organization that brings together the country’s radio stations. INDOTEL’s message was that any radio station that has been subject to complaints for operating in an irregular manner or that is breaking the law will be investigated.

Lama’s first reaction was to express dismay at the existence of these radio stations, especially at a time when media companies are investing in the latest technology. According to the local press, more than 10 radio stations have gone off the air in the city of Santiago de los Caballeros alone in recent years as a result of the financial crisis that has affected this sector.

José Enrique McDougal, a former president of ADORA, told the Catholic weekly publication Camino that one of the latest stations to disappear was Radiolandia, a closure that had resulted in a loss of locally produced radio content and an increase in content produced abroad.

McDougal mentioned other radio stations that had gone off the air in Santiago de los Caballeros: Radio Éxitos, Águila, Maibá, Acción, Tamboril, Azul, Hit Musical, Cibao, Ondas del Yaque, Santiago, and Ritmos, along with the aforementioned Radiolandia. He also mentioned irregularities reported in Cibao Central and Línea Noroeste, where some links of the state-owned Corporación Estatal de Radio y Televisión (CERTV) “have been extinguished” and “are no longer listened to in that part of the country.”

The root of the problem

In September, the local press highlighted the problems faced by Dominican radio stations. On one hand, reports said, Law 153-98, known as the General Telecommunications Law, the legal framework for radio frequencies in the DR, is not being effectively enforced. On the other hand, ADORA explained that its members had been affected by blackouts, interference from pirate radio stations, and a decline in radio advertising.

ADORA, whose most vocal representative is Lama, has complained that INDOTEL does not heed the association’s call for the closure of pirate radio stations. “Our most pressing problems are a shortage in electrical energy, the high cost of fuel, a higher exchange rate—as all the technical supplies needed to run and repair radio equipment are purchased in US dollars—and failure to enforced the Law 153-98,” Lama told the local press.
The communications group Grupo Corripio has reiterated this on several occasions, and has accused INDOTEL of not heeding reports of wrongdoing. ADORA has cited the example of a mayor who has been accused of running a pirate radio station. ADORA says it is waiting for INDOTEL to act on the information provided.

Martínez added that pirate radio stations have proliferated since 2010, adding that there could be as many as 20 on the air. This has led to calls for a national campaign to demand that INDOTEL fulfill its obligation as a regulator.

However, there are some who say ADORA itself is guilty of wrongdoing. José Alberto Selmo, president of the Asociación Dominicana de Emisoras Digitales (the Dominican Association of Digital Radio Stations, ADOEDI), has accused some members of ADORA of operating illegally and denied many of the allegations made against digital radio stations that are accused of operating without the necessary permits. According to Selmo, digital radio stations “have gained an increasingly large audience and offer job opportunities to hundreds of young people.”

The dispute over radio frequencies
These tensions reveal a dispute over who controls the country’s radio waves between traditional commercial radio stations and the growing market of digital radio stations. There are important economic interests at stake, both in the urban and rural areas.

A third actor that needs to be taken into account is the group of community radio stations created, along with Community Technology Centers (CTCs), during the first administration of former President Leonel Fernández a (1996-2000, 2004-2012) (NotiCen, May 20, 2004, and May 15, 2008) with the aim of democratizing information by creating “small, intelligent communities.”

To date, there are 48 CTCs, each with its own community radio station whose objectives are very different from those of purely commercial radio stations. Community stations are led by a director and supported by members of the community, such as teachers, pastors, Catholic priests, and doctors.

Many of these radio stations have also been accused of operating illegally, by posing as “community” radio stations when they are actually religious, commercial, or for profit frequencies, or even partisan frequencies. The commercial sector accuses them of unfair competition and of broadcasting political, commercial, and entertainment-related content.

Even the Inter-American Press Association (IAPA, also known as the Sociedad Interamericana de Prensa, SIP), in the final report of its most recent general assembly, which took place in Mexico, stated that “it was concerned about the Dominican Republic’s persistence in putting forward bills that limit freedom of expression.” According to the local press, the IAPA was responding to a report submitted by Miguel Franjul, the director of Listín Diario who is also vice-president of the IAPA’s Commission on Press Freedom and Freedom of Information in the Dominican Republic.

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