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Did Government Play a Role in the Firing of Radio Host Carmen Aristegui?

by Carlos Navarro

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"It's a dispute between private parties," the Secretaría de Gobernación (SEGOB) said in reference to the firestorm that erupted following the dismissal of controversial, but widely respected, journalist Carmen Aristegui from the radio news show MVS Noticias. SEGOB's statement sounded hollow in the aftermath of a series of events that have caused President Enrique Peña Nieto's administration to lose a great deal of credibility among Mexican citizens. An investigation by MVS reporters of some of the practices of officials in the Peña Nieto government might have been a catalyst that led to Aristegui's eventual dismissal.

Radio host fired after defending collaborators

MVS dismissed Aristegui on the weekend of March 14-15, after she refused to accept the dismissal of two of her investigative reporters, Daniel Lizárraga and Irving Huerta. Lizárraga and Huerta were fired after the Aristegui investigating team joined in a project to launch the Mexicoleaks site where would-be whistleblowers could send tips about alleged official corruption and other news. MVS management said the two reporters linked MVS Noticias to the project without the media company's authorization. The company initially dismissed the two reporters—and not Aristegui—even though the Mexicoleaks Web site listed "Aristegui Unit/MVS" as one of its six media sponsors.

While MVS openly acknowledged that the dismissal was directly related to the participation of Aristegui's team in Mexicoleaks, there were some suggestions that the real pressure came from the Peña Nieto government.

"Carmen Aristegui's crime was to try to give Mexican citizens through #Mexicoleaks a platform to denounce corruption anonymously," respected political analyst Denise Dresser said on Twitter.

The Netherlands-based organization Free Press Unlimited provided the format for Mexicoleaks. The organization encourages and supports investigative reporting, defends the rights of independent reporters, and provides a platform for citizens in many countries to help expose official corruption to the media. "This breaks the sources' natural wariness, the fear of being identified, the fear of violating secrecy agreements, the fear of political retaliation and concerns for their own safety," Dulce Ramos, editor of Animal Político, said of Mexicoleaks. "If the appropriate steps are taken in leaking something, it is impossible to know where it comes from."

Animal Político is one of the six media sponsors of Mexicoleaks along with Aristegui's team, Emeequis and Proceso magazines, and the Periodistas de a Pie and Mas de 31 organizations.

The firings of Lizárraga and Huerta also raised suspicions because the two men had conducted the bulk of the investigative work in the "casa blanca" scandal, which questioned property dealings by Peña Nieto's wife, actress Angélica Rivera. The first lady had allegedly received favorable treatment when acquiring a sprawling mansion in Mexico City's Lomas de Chapultepec neighborhood from wealthy entrepreneur Arturo Reyes Gómez.

Reyes Gómez at that time was a partner in a consortium seeking a concession for the high-speed train between Mexico City and the industrial hub of Querétaro ([SourceMex, Dec. 3, 2014](#)). The news of the transaction damaged Peña Nieto's credibility, forcing the president to put the project on hold ([SourceMex, Nov. 12, 2014](#)). In January of this year, the Peña Nieto government announced that the high-speed rail had been suspended indefinitely because of a budget shortfall linked to low oil-export revenues ([SourceMex, Feb. 4, 2015](#)).

On her morning radio news program on the day after Lizárraga and Huerta were dismissed, Aristegui told her audience that she was not notified of the firings. At that time, she called for the "unconditional" reinstatement of her colleagues, whom she described as essential to her news operation. Gerardo Albarrán de Alba, the MVS ombud, supported Aristegui, calling the firings a "disproportionate response" to the violations allegedly carried out by the two reporters.

Rather than accede to her demands, MVS fired the popular news show host. "As a company, we cannot accept conditions and ultimatums from our employees," the radio station said in a statement. "Dialogue cannot take place by imposing conditions but through an airing out of all the positions in order to reach an agreement. Individualistic attitudes have no place in our operation."

Aristegui receives widespread support

Aristegui's firing attracted broad condemnation in the media, although a handful of news columnists came to the defense of MVS. "If the owners of media companies are the ones who risk their capital and pay salaries, it is appropriate that they have the right of watching out not only for their interests but also for all their personnel," columnist Adrian Rueda wrote in the daily newspaper *Excélsior*.

The radio journalist, who has attracted a huge following in Mexico, is no stranger to controversy. Her outspoken and open style of reporting has made her enemies with the establishment but enhanced her reputation as a voice for the people. She has called the administration, particularly the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), to task, especially on the issue of corruption. In 2014, she revealed on her radio show that one of her reporters had uncovered a prostitution ring headed by Cuauhtémoc Gutiérrez de la Torre, head of the PRI in Mexico City.

Before the arrival of the PRI to the presidency in 2012, she took the administration of ex-President Felipe Calderón to task. She reported that the ex-president had asked the US National Security Administration (NSA) and the Department of Defense to set up a spying operation at the US Embassy in Mexico City. She later suggested Calderón was a hypocrite when he complained on Twitter that the US was spying on him ([SourceMex, Oct. 23, 2013](#)).

Aristegui's most visible brush with the Calderón government came in 2011, when she said on the air that she had information that the president was an alcoholic. That comment led MVS to fire the news host, with management suggesting that she made the allegations without a proper investigation. Some observers said that the report provided MVS an excuse to fire Aristegui for "other reasons." The firing caused a major outcry, which prompted MVS to rescind the firing ([SourceMex, March 9, 2011](#)).

The majority of the media commentaries in the wake of Aristegui's latest firing came out in support of the journalist, particularly in light of allegations that the Peña Nieto administration might have pressured MVS to oust Lizárraga and Huerta, and later Aristegui.

Many respected columnists came to Aristegui's defense, pointing out her valuable role in challenging the administration. "This country can't spare a single voice," columnist Katia D'Artigues Beauregard wrote in the daily newspaper *El Universal*. "On the contrary, we lack voices."

"I don't listen to Carmen Aristegui. Her style can irritate," Alejandro Hope, a political columnist for *Animal Político*, said on Twitter in the aftermath of the firing. "But we have to defend her presence on the radio. Without plurality we all lose."

"[Media] are so dependent on government renewal of concessions, on government licenses, on a whole set of regulations—so if you attract the displeasure of the administration, the sanctions can be very severe. Your concessions can be taken away from you. You can be shut down," said Dresser.

Journalist addressed controversial issues

Later, in a piece entitled "Je Suis Carmen" published in the daily newspaper *Reforma*, Dresser noted that Aristegui often addressed important issues for public discussion, often providing the opposite view from the official stance. "Every day, Carmen Aristegui defended the rights of many Mexicans, who are not even aware that they have those rights and do not fully comprehend that she is working in their best interest," said Dresser.

One sensitive issue that Aristegui brought to the public forum was the pedophilia scandal involving the Catholic Church, said Dresser. In particular, the problems involving Father Marcial Maciel, founder of the Legion of Christ, was a topic of extreme interest in Mexico. One of the guests on an Aristegui radio program was Raúl González Lara, who claimed to be Maciel's illegitimate son and was demanding that this be recognized publicly by Maciel and the Roman Catholic hierarchy.

In a later news segment in 2014, Aristegui questioned whether the Vatican should beatify the late Pope John Paul II, who had recognized Maciel as "an example for youth." Aristegui asked on her radio show in February 2014, "Does it make sense to continue this process of beatification?"

Aristegui also came to the defense on several occasions of fellow journalist Lydia Cacho, who was imprisoned on bogus charges of libel and defamation. Cacho was detained in her native state of Quintana Roo in 2006 and brought to a prison in Puebla state at the request of Puebla Gov. Mario Marín, in collusion with textile-manufacturing mogul Kamel Nacif Borge ([SourceMex, Feb. 22, 2006](#)). Cacho's book, *Los Demonios de Eden* (*Demons of Eden*), describes several networks of pedophiles and child pornographers and indirectly implicates Nacif. Dresser said Aristegui described a scene where Marín celebrated Cacho's arrest by breaking out a bottle of cognac.

Cacho returned the favor by condemning the firing in a piece published in Aristegui's online news site *Aristegui Noticias*. In the piece, Cacho defended the work of Lizárraga and Huerta and the rest of Aristegui's editorial team, who contributed to fostering a broad discussion on several acts of corruption in the Peña Nieto government, including the casa blanca scandal; the Tlatlaya case, where Army officers were said to have executed several drug dealers and bystanders ([SourceMex, Oct. 1, 2014](#)); and the administration's complicity in the disappearance and murders of students from the *Escuela Normal Rural de Ayotzinapa* Raúl Isidro Burgos in Guerrero state ([SourceMex, Oct. 15, 2014](#)).

"There were so many investigations, so many rotten situations brought to light, so much corruption revealed," said Dresser, who lauded Aristegui for her professionalism in bringing out these issues.

"One of the factors that has fostered the overwhelming sympathy for Carmen Aristegui ... is the confidence that the public has in her," columnist José Gil Olmos wrote in *Proceso*. "This confidence has been developed with years of consistent reporting and without any of the same obstacles that prevent those with political or economic obligations to present the news."

"Aristegui is a familiar voice, indispensable for those who demand good journalism in the electronic media. She is a respected opinion leader, and the news show that she hosts has very high ratings," columnist Humberto Musacchio wrote in *Excélsior* in October 2013.

"A feud between two private parties"

SEGOB attempted to downplay the controversy, issuing a sterile comment following the firing of Aristegui. "It is desirable that this conflict between two private parties is resolved, so that this communications company and the journalist continue providing valuable coverage for Mexican society," the interior ministry said in a statement.

While there is no smoking gun linking the administration to the firing, suspicions are broad. "At this moment, there is no clear and irrefutable proof that the government had anything to do with Carmen's departure from MVS," D'Artigues Beauregard wrote in *El Universal*. "But even the smallest of doubts will hit this government hard. As Peña Nieto said in a recent interview with [the British newspaper] *The Financial Times*, his government has a crisis of credibility."

Cacho said she has no doubt that there was some sort of retaliation against Aristegui by the administration, probably orchestrated by the president's communications director Eduardo Sánchez, who was once a counsel and lawyer to MVS owner Joaquín Vargas. "Vargas questioned Aristegui's credibility without speaking to her in private and then fired her collaborators, seizing all their hard drives and the information of their investigations," said Cacho. "Later, he produced a document intended to force the resignation of Carmen, and eventually he fired her."

"Is this government, which has shown a tendency for authoritarianism, so arrogant that it would force MVS (either through a threat or an offer of a concession) to quiet Aristegui and her team with the thought that the matter would be forgotten in a few months?" asked D'Artigues Beauregard. "[Would they be behind this firing] in a country with social networks that are very active and an election ahead? That is a question that must be answered."

Some observers noted that Aristegui's firing could not be reconciled even from a business perspective. "Over the last two decades Aristegui has turned herself into one of Mexico's most famous journalists and has used her radio show to amass a huge following," said the US-based business publication *Forbes* magazine.

"Firing Carmen Aristegui to protect the brand means they don't understand the client ... unless the client lives in Los Pinos [Mexico's presidential residence]," a news anchor for the US-based Spanish-language network *Univisión* said on Twitter.

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