



INVESTIGATION ON ECUADOR

MEDIA VOLATILITY AND THE RISKY REGULATION

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The technical arm of Conartel relating to frequencies, the Superintendence of Telecommunications, which is today coming in for a lot of blame, has as its statutory members, a presidential delegate, the education minister, a representative of the armed forces and the big bosses of TV and radio proprietors' organisations.

➤ and even then only under certain conditions. Any message that could compromise state security falls under the censor's axe. Official signed permission is required to broadcast any content that could be deemed too offensive. The law also lays down that all media must broadcast one hour of official programmes, as well as the results of announcements, statements or actions of the head of state and his cabinet. This was the start of the compulsory "cadenas". Offenders against these measures risk bans of up to one week before loss of their frequency. Some journalists even go to prison.

As in Argentina, where an Audiovisual Service Communication Law (SCA) fortunately replaced in October 2009 the broadcast law inherited from the military regime, the restoration of democracy in Ecuador meant an initial easing of the rules. But this tidying up under the presidency of Sixto Durán Ballén, in 1995, had unforeseen pernicious effects that explain the current problems. "In fact, it was a partial reform affecting radio frequencies", notes César Ricaurte, director of press freedom observatory Fundamedios. "The National Council for Radio and Telecommunications (Conartel) has become the enforcer for politicians who are also media owners, sharing the frequencies between them. Reform therefore fostered a huge press concentration. All this seriously contributed to discrediting the profession as a whole."

PUBLIC SERVICE OR STATE MEDIA?

It was therefore time to usher in a new era, based on a law appropriate to the times, even if more than 65% of the population still gets its news from television. This fact explains why the Correa administration initially went for a reworking of the media landscape rather than regulation. Things quickly got contentious between the Carondelet and the privately owned press following his investiture in 2007. The need for Rafael Correa, to respond to this challenge provided a pressing argument for launching a public press which had not existed previously. The young president lost no time in pressing ahead, adding Ecuador TV to the broadcast sector and re-launching *Radio Nacional*, which had been dormant through lack of funds. The news agency *Andes*, online newspaper *El Ciudadano* and the daily *El Telégrafo* – taken over by the state in 1999 to wipe out the debts of the bankrupt publishing group – completed the stable. But along with public media are the "confiscated" (incautados) – up to 12 of them of all kinds. Among them were the Quito's two big-



Rafael Correa

gest TV stations *GamaTV* and *TC Televisión*, seized in July 2008 after legal proceedings were taken against their owners, the banking family Isaías, for "embezzlement", "fraudulent bankruptcy" and "tax evasion". This episode came just before the vote on the new Constitution, one clause of which provides for a ban from media ownership of any banking group.

"There is therefore massive state investment in the communications field and in particular in television", said a Fundamedios source. "While it is true that there is a private media concentration, Ecuador does not have the humongous groups such as *Televisa* in Mexico and *Clarín* in Argentina. And in fact, since the takeover of *Gama* and *TC*, the state controls three of the major national television channels. "But should one consider public service and state media to be the same thing? This shortcut is used in the private press, but does

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not really describe the situation. Giovanna Tassi formerly of the privately owned daily *Hoy* and the presidential press service at the start of Correa's term, now heads the *Radio Nacional*. "We do not get any calls from listeners complaining about pro-government propaganda. It is true that we want to work with the radical changes promoted by the Correa government, but we are justifiably ready to break with the political agenda imposed by the privately owned press", she said. *Radio Nacional* operates with 'blocks' of programmes relating to civil society. We talk about social programmes, we give air time to women's groups, peasant and indigenous communities." In the written press, *El Telégrafo* works in a similar way "with special supplements on themes such as citizenship, health ➤

