



In the photograph, they are both smiling. In the foreground, on the left hand side, a man in a short-sleeved buttoned white shirt, jeans and a metal watch, holds a bottle of water in his right hand. He laughs heartily. He is Herbert Saca. On the right hand side is a man in a hat, also in a white shirt, but with a blue neckerchief. He is Juan Umaña Samayoa, a candidate for

reelection for mayor of Metapan, located in the department of Santa Ana, in the west of El Salvador, for the Party of National Reconciliation. In the background, a red tent and the silhouettes of an apparently large group of people.

Juan Umaña is one of the politicians linked to the Taxis Cartel, a structure even bigger and more influential than the Perrones -- the powerful group of dairy and undocumented immigrant smugglers -- according to intelligence sources quoted by El Faro in various articles in which the structure of the organization is revealed.

SEE ALSO: Coverage of the Taxis Cartel

The photograph in which Umaña and Saca share a smile was taken a few weeks before the former was reelected mayor of Metapan, a municipality in the Taxis Cartel's zone of influence. Investigations by El Faro reveal that two unionists from the Metapan mayoralty have been assassinated, a municipal councilor captured with five kilos of cocaine and even the mayor himself attacked. "The five cases," say the online newspaper, "have one common denominator: they involve the word 'narcotrafficking.'" [1]

This is the last article of a five-part series on police corruption in El Salvador. See the whole series here.

When Herbert Saca took the photo at the end of 2011, his position before President Mauricio Funes Cartagena was already one of privilege. Another

journalistic investigation [2] and various testimonies [3] confirm that fact, as do intelligence reports produced by the Intelligence Organism of the State (OIE) from 2009 onwards.

"Herbert began to enter the Presidential House because the inner circle of the president had driven him crazy with the idea that the FMLN (Farabundo Marti Front for National Liberation) was watching him and wanted to fuck with him. The Amigos de Mauricio (Funes) people thought that they could use him as a political operator but they were wrong: Herbert used them to get on the inside."

The person quoted is an ex-official of President Funes, a member of the FMLN, who left government in 2011 after a change in the security ministry.

The Fixer

It is impossible to tell the story of the underworld in El Salvador without mentioning the police and Herbert Ernesto Saca Vides. Saca is, according to those who know him, an affable man. His friends -- many and powerful -- say that he typifies the folksy style that used to mark success in Salvadoran politics. His enemies -- who also include people with power, above all on the right of the political spectrum, represented by the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) -- say that he is one of the darkest political operators of the last two decades.

"He is a very astute man, with a grand capacity for relationships, but also a great figure for darkness," said another ex-official from the Funes administration, independent of the FMLN, who has known him for the past five years. "He is, without a doubt, an effective operator. Though clearly not for a healthy political operation."

For his relations with the upper echelons of political power; for his capacity to make his influence transcend both the last ARENA administration and the first FMLN administration; for his links forged with organized crime since the beginning of the decade; for being on the radar of the United States since at least 2008; for knowing how to take advantage of and widen the corrupt structures found within the Salvadoran National Police (PNC), Herbert Saca can be considered the most effective operator of political power. He is also responsible for the money from criminal organizations that finances electoral campaigns, according to testimonies collected from drug traffickers and senior ex-officials from three different governments [4]. His life history reflects, better than that of any other political operator, the history of infiltration in El Salvador.

To get an idea of its scope, analysts at the State Intelligence Agency (IEA) gathered around 1,797 calls made or received between February 15 and June 15

of that year for the 7833-7110 and 7180-4034 numbers registered in the name of Herbert Saca. These reports register calls made, which, according to intelligence investigators, the OIE is empowered to do. But no telephone conversations were recorded.

Among others, Saca called PNC inspector Walter Reymundo Lazo Merino, the former head of the Organized Crime Elite Division and a big player within Interpol El Salvador. He also called the wife of Marcos Gregorio Sanchez Trejo (president of the Court of Auditors); a unit of the Legislative Assembly; the mayor of Santa Cruz Analquito, Cuscatlan; the Supreme Court; four cellars assigned to the Supreme Electoral Tribunal; Genaro Ramirez (president of the Association of Salvadoran Bus Companies); and a company represented by Irving Pavel Tochez and Nicholas Antonio Salume Babun.

The report also listed four calls to the number 7190-9100, the corporate account assigned to President Funes' Presidential Residence.

Aside from managing campaigns and political deals, Herbert Saca -- even while he was an advisor to President Elias Antonio Saca Gonzalez and later to Funes - has had relationships with various people investigated at different moments by the government for drug trafficking and organized crime, and he appears linked to Perrones and the Taxis Cartel.

Herbert Saca also shared a lawyer with Reynerio Flores Lazo, one of the principal leaders of Perrones. He was subject to an investigation for selling cars to the other leader of Los Perrones, Jose Natividad "Chepe" Luna Periera. When his cousin Antonio Saca became president, Herbert Saca started to charge various narcos for "protection," but Reynerio refused to pay.

SEE ALSO: Coverage of Elites and Organized Crime

"He had a chance to fix things, but by then he didn't want to," said a source about Reynerio's decision not to pay Saca.

The decision was fatal. In 2008, after several failed attempts by the El Salvadoran police to nab several members of the Perrones, the government finally succeeded. This round of investigations ended with accusations against Reynerio, his wife, his brother Hector Armando and Armando's wife. The Flores Lazo's claimed that this was a political vendetta directed by Herbert Saca. Reynerio was sentenced to 60 years.

By that same year, Washington had taken notice of Herbert Saca -- and the entire administration of President Saca.

"A group came from the United States, which initially didn't identify itself as an official investigation, but later it became clear to me that it was, and they began to ask questions about corruption," says a member of ARENA who was an official in the Saca presidency.

Another ex-official confirms that he was called by Washington in 2010 to talk about the president's cousin, Herbert.

In mid-2013, two officials from Barack Obama's administration, from two different agencies that analyze law and politics in El Salvador, confirmed that the United States had open investigations into Herbert Saca. That, they both explained, did not mean that Washington was considering taking action against him, but neither did it mean it was not.

Herbert Saca's rise coincides with that of 25 ex-military officials within the PNC -- the moment at which the cancer of corruption began to spread through the PNC. Organized crime, above all in the east, reaped the first fruits of its investment in agents and officials that had passed through the national anti-drug trafficking body (DAN), the Financial Division, the eastern division and the border division. The influence ceased to limit itself to just the relationships formed by bribes in local brothels and police stations. These friends were now fully in bed with the powerful, such as the central headquarters of the PNC in San Salvador. But it wasn't until the period of Saca's presidency (2004 - 2009) and the arrival of his brother Herbert to the circles of power, always with the PNC director Ricardo Menesses in front, that the infiltration became institutionalized.

By 2004, organized crime's penetration of the state through the PNC had brought the mafia into politics through three mechanisms: one, the financing of political campaigns, first at local level and later at a national level, such as the presidential elections in 2009; two, the payment of bribes to political operators to guarantee the free operation of criminal networks and the passage and protection of their merchandise; and three, the prior warning by moles within the PNC of operations aimed at capturing gang members. And from then on the cancer was there for life.

Missed Opportunity

"The problem with the PNC is that the commissioners spend more time seeing how to fuck one another over than really getting anything done... At this stage it could be that the only solution is to get rid of those promoted early on and look for new leaders," said a US federal agent in a San Salvador cafe. [5] His words

are still a surprise, as Washington has been one of the principal allies of the PNC; one of its main financiers. Its primary supporter.

But 2012 and 2013 were not good years for the relationship between Washington and the PNC. The truce between the MS13 and Barrio 18 gangs marked a distancing between state security forces and the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA).



In 2013, US Senator Patrick Leahy had harsh words for the current Salvadoran president, Mauricio Funes, about corruption within the police, the lack of transparency and inaction of the government against money laundering and organized crime. Dissatisfied with Funes' actions in the area of security, which had allowed officials accused of corruption

to gain power with the PNC, Leahy was at the point of freezing a multi-million dollar US/El Salvador cooperation program known as Fomilenio II. In the end, the senator did not stop the aid, but he made it clear that the final package would depend in part on the cleaning up of the police.

At the heart of Leahy's complaints about the PNC were the oft-repeated questions about the failures of the state to go after organized crime, about corruption within the PNC, about the lack of institutionalization and about the presence of suspect officials in public office.

"Although El Salvador shows some signs of progress ... it remains a country with weak democratic institutions, in which the independent judiciary has been attacked, corruption has increased and transnational criminal organizations and money laundering have flourished," the senator said in Vermont during a Senate plenary on September 18, 2013. He continued: "In the last few years I have seen how Salvadorans are victims of violence, of a corrupt police, of individuals in security positions who worry more about getting rich than improving conditions for their people." [6]

Senator Patrick Leahy's words about the PNC very much resembled those 20 years before by officials from the United Nations who were supervising a territorial deployment following the signing of peace accords and who spoke, frustrated, about the lack of controls and transparency in the new police institution.

Awaiting the new El Salvador government, which will take office in June this year, after the second voting round which will take place on March 9, discreet voices among US and El Salvador officials are starting to sound alarm bells: "At this stage it could be that the only solution is to get rid of those promoted early on and look for new leaders," said a US federal agent in mid-2013.

Those first promotions, those which have dominated the PNC since the days of the first transgressions -- which allowed officials, values and a culture of impunity to flow unchecked -- have retained power for 20 years. Those first promotions have ruled over two decades marked in general by investigative failures, the absence of internal controls and the consolidation of organized crime.

Yes, there were exceptional periods marked by the bravery of officials and agents who took advantage of the few loopholes that existed to try to stop the institutional inaction, complicity and neglect. It was during these exceptions that there were various attempts at purging, behind closed doors or openly. It was then when some officials, during the years of Armando Calderon Sol's presidency (1994-1999), dared to accuse political elites of involvement in organized crime. But all these gestures of integrity and ethics were, however, isolated acts and exceptions -- not a sustained trend capable of stopping the infiltration of organized crime which today still infects the PNC.

** This is a shortened version of an investigation by the Salvadoran journalist Hector Silva. The contents are part of a soon to be released book entitled: "The Infiltrators: the story of corruption in the police of El Salvador." This is the fifth article of a five-part series on police corruption in El Salvador. See whole series here.*

Silva is a journalist who worked for 15 years in La Prensa Grafica of El Salvador. Since 2012, he has been a fellow at the Center for Latin American and Latino Studies at American University. For additional information, please contact the author by email .

Footnotes

[1] Lemus y Arauz, "Otro concejal de Metapan vinculado por la autoridades al trafico de drogas", El Faro, 27 January, 2012.

[2] Sergio Arauz, "Los nuevos amigos del presidente," El Faro, 4 October, 2011.

[3] Between September 2012 and August 2013, the interviewer spoke to two former officials from the Saca administration and half a dozen politicians of the

administration of President Funes to expand on the relationship with Herbert Saca. They and two U.S. officials, off the record, confirmed the closeness.

[4] To develop the profile of Herbert Saca, the author undertook interviews with officials from the administrations of Presidents Flores, Saca and Funes. He also spoke with members and former members of The Perrones that established working relationships with him and have shared that information with U.S. agents. Information was also corroborated by two dozen law enforcement officials in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and the United States.

[5] The author spoke with this official, a member of a law enforcement agency, in a cafe in San Salvador. The author also talked about the PNC with another U.S. official, a diplomat, in a coffee shop in Washington. They had no trouble in making its assessment of the PNC, the force with which the United States has collaborated most in Central America, but they did so on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to publicly discuss their country's position regarding Salvadoran domestic policy.

[6] Congressional Records: "Senator Leahy's Statement on El Salvador's MCC," Washington DC, 18 September, 2013.

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