

HONDURAS: A HARD PLACE FOR THE EXERCISE OF JOURNALISM

Executive Summary

When it comes to free speech in Honduras, the prospect is not too different from what happened in 2020, since similar conditions remain for the professional practice of journalism. All this is worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic that poses a serious risk for most of the newsmen in the country. Although two people are in prison for the Mobile Hospitals scandal, and one faces indictment abroad, the secrecy and corruption in and mismanagement of the pandemic – specifically in the vaccination process– affected the exercise of freedom of expression.

Introduction

Currently, the situation for the exercise of quality and objective journalism in Honduras continues to be troublesome, since the climate throughout the period surveyed shows no variation with respect to better living conditions for media employees, who are immersed in the country's general economic crisis.

Corruption continues to affect the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, since the purchase of seven costly mobile hospitals have not served the purposes which they were acquired for (DW Spanish, 2021). On the other hand, the purchase of vaccines for Hondurans has not been effective, prices and terms of their millionaire contracts have not been disclosed.

The media, most of them economically affected by the pandemic, have not provided their news staff with biosecurity Personal Protective Devices (PPD) such as masks, antibacterial gel, face covering, so journalists are at a high risk of becoming infected with COVID.

Results Analysis

As for Honduras' overall ranking, it scored 61.47 points, well above the 55.61 index global scoring. One factor to highlight [One noteworthy fact] regarding a greater perception of freedom of expression is the importance of social media in citizens' communication. This represents an opportunity to express opinions on socially, politically, and economically relevant issues; were this new instrument not to exist, we would continue to be subject to what is reported by mainstream media.

The decrease in violence, crime, and impunity rates against journalists matches the decrease in the rates of violence per 100,000 inhabitants in Honduras.

The number of homicide victims declined 14.1% (576 fewer victims) in 2020 as compared to 2019. The homicide rate in 2020 was 37.6 homicides per 100 thousand population, the

lowest in the last decade (the rate is down by more than half compared to the rate in 2013). (UNDP, 2020)

Since we are approaching the end of President Juan Orlando Hernández's term, the control over the media has been declining, to such an extent that there are already TV and radio stations and printed press that candidly criticize decisions from the government. For example, the handling of the pandemic has been erratic and very poorly managed.

The Branches of Government Are Trying to Manipulate the Exercise of Journalism

The Legislative environment scored 2.35 points in relation to situations unfavorable to freedom of expression. The National Congress has not held any sessions during last and the ongoing year. It is the only Congress in Latin America where no floor sessions are being held. Therefore, press coverage of legislative sessions and incidents has been extremely cumbersome and restricted. Congresspersons themselves are complaining that the ruling party is passing laws at will.

Recently, the National Congress enacted that the information about the contract for the purchase of vaccines from pharmaceutical company Pfizer should be secret. This has been considered as a total setback, because even though Pfizer requests confidentiality on the formulas it uses and their pricing, it was not necessary to mandate total secrecy for the whole contract and what had been signed.

The Legislative engaged in an embarrassing dispute with the Institute of Access to Public Information (Instituto de Acceso a la Información Pública, IAIP), since IAIP ruled that it was not correct to withhold every detail of the contract. In Honduras it is unknown the pricing requirements the government is meeting to purchase the COVID-19 vaccine. Most of the population have doubts that these operations as a whole are being carried out in the best and most correct of ways.

Executive branch

In Honduras, according to law, among the President's powers under the National Telecommunications Committee (Comisión Nacional de Telecomunicaciones, CONATEL), the President's Office is entitled to authorize or overrule licenses for operations and maintenance of radio frequencies. If a broadcasting station not aligned with the government makes the slightest error or omission within its administrative responsibilities, its license will be immediately revoked –in recent years, such thing happened to opposition-leaning Radio Globo.

The allocation of sizable advertising funds from the government and the ruling party force most of the media to cover all the Presidential House's activities, regardless of their importance, because in times of economic hardship like these the media must ensure their sustainability and survival.

The government did not engage in talks with any sector when discussing the 2022 Income and Expenditures Budget, which rose to over HNL 20 million compared to the ongoing year's budget. This represents a detrimental burden to the country and for anyone who wins the

upcoming elections, despite suggestions and recommendations made by the civil society (La Prensa, 2021).

The Judiciary

The U.S. Department of State released the Engel's List, which notes that 21 Honduran politicians were involved in corruption offenses (La Prensa, 2021). The Judiciary's attitude toward corruption has not been decisive, there is a climate of secrecy and leniency with many involved in scandals such as Arca Abierta (Open Treasure Chest) and Pandora. Several of the defendants have already been freed.

The Judicial branch, as well as the Legislative, has heard court cases at its premises not very often. The plenary meetings of justices from the Supreme Court of Justice are almost inaccessible, which makes press coverage a real problem. Although it is true that the officials from the Judiciary have appointed spokespersons in different courts, such as the Anti-Corruption Court and the Courts of Appeal, they only report what the justices are interested in, not the proceedings of a trial or information that is of interest to the press.

In the case of trials with considerable media coverage, some of the defendants have already been acquitted by the new Criminal Code; however, the justices do not explain the consequences of their rulings. As a token example, there are those involved in the Pandora case. We see how this makes us imagine that the new Criminal Code is favoring offenders.

Realm A: Freedom of The Press in Honduras Is Obstructed by Lack of Transparency, and Secrecy

We have mentioned above the case of current Juan Orlando Hernandez's administration's Secrecy Law, which barred more than 20 Offices of the Secretary of State and government agencies from providing any information on bids, administrative proceedings, and budget management in their organizations. It is evidence of the government's lack of transparency. Access to public information is extremely limited, there is a Public Information Institute (Instituto de Información Pública) that is a "white elephant", it is not overseen, and it does not have the coercive power needed to contain all the information about institutions; it limits itself to only collect the information issued by them, omitting to verify if it is legitimate.

Under the Secrecy Law, the information they handle is withheld for ten years; when that period has expired, any process against any government officer who has committed any irregularity before the law reaches its statute of limitations under the Law. The current administration runs disproportionate advertising campaigns on mainstream media extolling the presidential figure. Citizens are not given the opportunity to express themselves against irregular acts committed during this administration. This alienating advertising is intended to overshadow and silence the media regarding the allegations of corruption that have surfaced.

The programming offer from the official government broadcast media outlet does not allow citizens the opportunity to express themselves. It was recently found out that one of the present administration's tactics was to create social media accounts, mainly in Facebook, logically with the purpose of favoring the government in matters of public interest. This army of people who

support the current administration overshadows any negative anti-government comments and highlights the works of public interest promoted by the President's Office.

Realm B: The System Seeks to Damage the Image of Journalists

The use of economic resources for advertising purposes granted to several journalists in the current administration, involving them to alleged acts of corruption, was reported maliciously and perversely in an official letter from the Attorney General's Office –based on fabricated documentary proof– and by people who support President Juan Orlando Hernandez. The list was widely disseminated without fact-checking names or figures and whether the advertising was in fact legal or illegal, but as a result there was a public “lynching” against the journalists who were listed (En Alta Voz, 2021)

During the President's appearances in public, opposition-leaning journalists were granted restricted access because it was taken for granted that they would ask questions to those within the governmental sphere they would not be comfortable with. The President has limited himself to mandatory transmission addresses on national broadcast media, in which only the government's truth is expressed regarding very sensitive topics such as vaccination and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Realm C: The Exercise of Journalism Continues to Be Dangerous in Honduras.

There is an extremely ineffective safeguard mechanism, similar to the one that took care of ill-fated environmentalist Bertha Cáceres who, in spite of having been granted protection measures, could not save her life from a criminal attack. On August 4 this year, the Honduran Bar Association (Colegio de Abogados de Honduras) requested its withdrawal from the State's protection mechanism, considering it inefficient because of the high levels of violence that plague the country.

Impunity of serious offenses against journalists and media employees still reaches 91.1%, trials remain dormant in courts and those guilty are still at large. For example, the murder of journalist Luis Almendares, who blew the whistle on the Honduran police's corruption and violence. Two armed men shot him dead in his beloved Comayagua, but as of yet no one is indicted for his case despite the fact that there were witnesses in the event (RSF, 2020).

The National Autonomous University of Honduras' National Violence Observatory (Observatorio Nacional de la Violencia de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras) called this May 27, 2021 on an investigation so that the violent deaths of 90 journalists and media professionals murdered between 2005 and 2020 would not go unpunished. A significant 91.1% of the homicides against journalists and communicators were committed by using firearms, most of them men (Presencia Universitaria, 2021).

Realm D: Social Media Take on Mainstream Media

The government's lavish campaign that publicizes the President's achievements is a way to exert control over the media that are widely opposed to the regime. In addition to getting on constant mandatory addresses on broadcast radio and television, which have come back in reason of the increased COVID-19 cases, the government's advertising campaign on mainstream media outlets buys it some public peace.

The media, which are in an unprecedented crisis stemming from natural disasters Eta and Iota, plus the crisis that COVID-19 is leaving behind, have no choice but to broadcast the news, radio and television mandatory addresses, and anything that favors the current government.

Recently, a media alliance was created –mostly comprised of entities not belonging to the Media Outlet Association (Asociación de Medios de Comunicación, AMC), which has created much controversy among businesses. Apparently, it is a political move from the President against the Telecentro group, which used to have the monopoly of government and private advertising.

Conclusions

To a great extent, free speech in Honduras will be determined by the upcoming general elections winner. President Juan Orlando Hernandez established the Secrecy Law, which from every point of view is restrictive of freedom of the press; the next President of the republic is expected to repeal a law that is so questioned abroad.

Another pending issue for the next period under survey is the prosecution of those who have committed murders against journalists, since according to the national press 91% of these serious offenses remain unpunished. Court rulings and investigations continue to be slow, very secretive, and relying on a criminal code that favors offenders and those who commit the crime by reducing penalties.

In Honduras, there are no restrictions on the use of the Internet as there are in other countries. Any citizen with access to a search engine can find any newspaper in the world, and can also criticize or endorse the government authorities' decisions through social media. Some media outlets have call-in shows that allow criticizing the government's decision making in its face, which gives an impression of freedom of expression.

Because of the malicious way the National Congress members hold their sessions by using online meeting tools (Zoom), the media cannot appropriately provide every detail of what is being brought to discussion. Representatives have approved debt, budgets, and ratified executive orders omitting prior debate, and timely information on the implications of such decisions is not provided.

In the Judiciary, impunity against many murdered media employees remains. It is never known who did it, by whom they were masterminded. The President has decided to communicate with his people through long and tedious mandatory addresses on broadcast radio and TV, in which basically the Head of State is shown in a flattering light and most of the times says the same message over and over.

On the other hand, in Honduras, studying the career of journalism in public or private universities is not a prerequisite; anyone can host a radio or television show if so determined by

the media outlet's owner; foul language is not censored, the whistle can be blown on any government officer without proof, or any authorities can be even slandered.

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