

**HONDURAS:
UNDER LEFT-WING RULE**

Executive Summary

The repeal of the Law on Classification of Public National Security and Defense Records, (*Clasificación de Documentos Públicos Relacionados con la Seguridad y Defensa Nacional*) by the government of President Iris Xiomara Castro Sarmiento, brings hope; so does a new policy of transparency regarding the handling of information compared to that of the past public administration, since this law, which was enacted during the previous government, represented a strong restriction on freedom of expression, and room for corruption and lack of transparency in government duties.

Introduction

This report covers two phases: From August 2 to November 28, 2021, the date on which former President Juan Orlando Hernández Alvarado, today indicted in New York courts for alleged involvement in activities linked to drug trafficking (*El País*, 2022); the other being from January 27, 2022 to the closing date of this report, during which President Iris Xiomara Castro de Zelaya, the first woman holding the highest office of the Republic, began her term in office.

The conditions to do good journalism imbued with truthfulness and objectivity continue to be difficult in Honduras, since the situation established in the period from August 2, 2021 to August 1, 2022, has not changed and it remains a high-risk career.

One of the promises during the presidential campaign was the repeal of the "law of secrecy" [or "law on official secrets"], which concealed much of the information on public administration. (*ContraCorriente*, 2022). Once the current administration repeals this law, the press will have more access to news, investigations, and findings related to government activities and, consequently, corruption will be reduced and the professional practice of journalism in Honduras will be encouraged.

Background

Regarding the global rating of Honduras, in the period from August 2, 2021 to August 1, 2022, which reached 61.47 points, surpassing the overall index of 55.61 points, we can point out that although there is currently full freedom of expression on the part of the authorities, the reality is that there are methods of censorship curbing this constitutional right, such as government advertising as a form of control.

Environments: Institutional action against freedom of expression

Under the administration of President Castro, the state-owned channel has been upgraded to broadcast government-related activities; the signal of Radio Nacional de Honduras has been

improved, and the newspaper *Poder Popular* was created, competing with longstanding mainstream media in Honduras. This challenges the entire *status quo*. A significant amount of public funds is being spent on these state-owned media without [yielding] the expected results.

The government had maintained the policy of not allocating advertisement on national mainstream media, as a decision by the authorities against these media companies. However, after witnessing a sharp decline in the premier's image, it was forced to return to this practice as a method of government control over the media.

The Minister of Strategy and Communications, Milton Benítez, uses government resources and privileged information against the alleged enemies of the government, either on social media, or in a show produced by this official and broadcast on alternative media. This represents unfair competition and abuse of power during this administration.

The president ordered the dismissal of many staff members of the national mechanism for the protection of journalists in Honduras, thereby endangering the lives of many news professionals under this figure. (*Reporters sans frontières*, 2022). This mechanism, which was already underfunded, has practically been dismantled with these layoffs by the Castro Zelaya administration.

The opacity and lack of transparency in the election of the Speaker of the National Congress, Luis Redondo, begins a controversial chapter in Honduras since, lacking enough votes of title congresspersons, by forceful methods, public demonstrations, and votes of acting congresspersons, it was possible to impose a head officer of the Legislative with ties to the current ruler. (*Reportar sin Miedo*, 2022).

The repeal of crimes against honor has not been completed by this administration, since six articles contained in the new Criminal Code (*Código Penal*) affect the journalistic guild (*Proceso Digital*, 2022). Honduran journalists continue their [professional] exercise amid multiple threats of imprisonment for any statements that offend the honor of a person, which is prosecuted under a criminal and not a civil legal category, as in other countries of America.

Once the extradition order of former President Juan Orlando Hernández was announced, in one of the offices of the Judiciary, the suspect released a statement to the Honduran people calling for solidarity and claiming his innocence that was disseminated by all the media, in violation of all the rules established for an extraditable person (CNN, 2022).

Stemming from the process of change of officials to be conducted because of a new [term of the] Supreme Court of Justice, many trials have been stalled, slowed down, or become very opaque, since most judges do not want to issue rulings affecting them in the face of a new management of the Judiciary. This slowness in the Judiciary delays trials, lawsuits, and filings, generating legal uncertainty.

The current Supreme Court of Justice has not reduced the high rates of impunity or corruption and does not prosecute drug-trafficking offenses, bringing about a weakened rule of law. This translates into an unfavorable environment for national and foreign investment that seeks certainty from the authorities.

Realm A: Honduran citizens free to express themselves

The assessment of the institutional action regarding Informed Citizens Free to Express Themselves is 12.71 out of 23.00 points possible. This perception stems from the fact that, in Honduras, there is still a degree of freedom within acceptable ranges. There are different sources of

audiovisual, print, and digital news allowing citizens to acquire a deeper understanding of issues of any kind or importance regarding the country.

The existence of official media voicing a monolithic truth of the government of the Republic creates a bias, causes unfair competition, and a process of indoctrination to a new way of ruling and undermining the system in place prior to its accession to power. Its efforts to establish a National Constituent Assembly (*Asamblea Nacional Constituyente*) to modify the National Constitution of the Republic (*Constitución Nacional de la República*) requires significant media activity and intensive involvement of the media and the government.

In this administration, social media will undoubtedly play a major role. As happened during the government of Juan Orlando Hernández, this government will seek to control the media by government advertising, tax-related threats, and selective audits on opponents of the current regime.

Realm B: Enough conditions for journalism

As presented in last year's report, conditions have remained largely unchanged. Most journalists must follow the editorial policies of the media where they work, so that there is a limitation on statements, pieces, and investigations being conducted on this government in the country, since its ideology and practices reflect that they want to impose themselves at all costs. This restricts freedom of expression.

The owners of major media outlets, for the most part, do not have a very warm relationship with the head of State; they do not meet or discuss the main challenges facing the country. This translates into a tense relationship and editorial policies not constructive for the country.

Use of foul language by high-ranking public officials, permanent attacks on the press, and an environment that seeks to manipulate the masses in favor of the government, do nothing to contribute to a harmonious climate that the Honduran government and press should have. It is the first time in the history of Honduras that a Minister of Strategy and Communication openly attacks media owners and directors who do not fully support this administration.

Realm C: Violence and Impunity

In Honduras, murder rates have decreased. However, in recent months, there has been an uptick, reaching an average of 36 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. (UNDP, 2022). The previous presidential administration allocated an enormous amount of resources to reduce these alarming figures by creating a military police agency, an anti-extortion corps, and a security tax to fund these new law enforcement agencies [*sic*].

Within its security policy, the current administration is creating the Community Police, which is a security force closer to the population. These are public order bodies similar to those operating in Nicaragua and Venezuela.

Honduras is a violent country, as in the last ten years the murder rate was at 93.2 per 100,000 inhabitants. (IDB, 2017). Meanwhile, journalists were no strangers to this reality due to the significant number of media workers who were violently killed.

Realm D: Control over the Media

At the beginning of the current administration, the government's policy was not to invest a single penny on mainstream media, since according to the Minister of Strategy and Communications, they acted in collusion with former President Juan Orlando Hernández. Those first months, according to Milton Benítez, the government saved L 1,200 million [L: ISO code for local currency, the Lempira] in advertising, approximately USD 45 million. As the president's popularity dropped, her advisor / husband said in a public appearance that he would begin buying advertising space in all media to publicize the presidential work.

A list of journalists who were awarded government advertising [contracts] under the previous government was revealed. They were exposed in the media, also subjected to public scorn. Public opinion was manipulated by stating that such advertising funds constituted an act of corruption; and they were threatened with bringing them to court although no crimes had been committed (*Prohonduras Network*, 2022).

A case file is open in the Attorney General's Office, even though a ruling has been issued by the justice in a chamber of the Supreme Court of Justice whereby it is implied that that such advertising does not constitute any irregular conduct. However, the full docket filed with the Attorney General's Office by the Prosecutor's Specialized Unit against Corrupt Rings (*Unidad Fiscal Especializada Contra Redes de Corrupción*, Uferco) headed by Prosecutor Luis Javier Santos Cruz, lingers pending an acquittal, thereby damaging the image of the newsmen [named].

Conclusions

Honduras is going through times of change. The socialist model risks becoming an imitation of the one that has been adopted in Nicaragua and Venezuela, first calling for a National Constituent Assembly, and then perpetuating itself in power. The press, which should be the guarantor of freedom of expression, is extremely frightened because, as happened in the neighboring country, media outlets were closed and some journalists were imprisoned.

We are currently in the process of electing a new Supreme Court of Justice, and there are clear signs that the Libertad y Refundación party has already seized some seats on the nominations committee. Despite the efforts of many civil society organizations to have a forthcoming Supreme Court of Justice above politics and one that reduces impunity, the ruling party is clearly going great lengths to secure a majority.

The National Congress must de-penalize crimes against honor. Under this current scenario, it will be unlikely for this body to repeal the relevant provisions from new Criminal Code, because the Speaker of the House has been harshly criticized by the press for his unlawful election. Additionally, he openly engages in conduct previously questioned by him.

In the Judiciary, impunity has not diminished. Corruption was outrageous in the previous government, and there is still a perception that the Judiciary only punishes the underprivileged, as the U.S. ambassador to Honduras, Crescencio Arcos, once stated.

In general terms, freedom of expression in Honduras faces many challenges. The existing perception is that the current regime will attack the press in different ways, seeking to silence it to pursue their agenda of remaining in power.

Working conditions for journalists remain precarious. Because of the [COVID-19] pandemic and the passage of hurricanes Eta and Iota, many jobs were lost. This increased the current unemployment rate among the media. The most layoffs reported are among print outlets; all this makes it more difficult to lead a decent life by practicing journalism.

Despite government control, threats, and extortion, social media in Honduras have had an enormous growth, to such an extent that citizens report on news that affect the government, be it unconcealable the facts of corruption, negligence, and nepotism amid which we currently live.

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