

## **ECUADOR**

### **VIOLENCE, CRIME, AND GOVERNMENT'S INEFFICIENCY DETERIORATE ECUADOR'S INDEX SCORE**

#### **Executive Summary**

Ecuador has experienced a noticeable decline in the Chapultepec Index. A score of 43.85, represents a decline compared to the previous year when it scored 49.55 points. This decline is exhibited in all aspects and in most of the realms assessed by the survey. With regards to the exercise of journalism, the situation is particularly worrisome. Two journalists were murdered, four had to leave the country due to threats, and one journalist was reported missing. Additionally, more than 150 attacks against media workers were reported in a context of high violence and crime in the country.

#### **Introduction**

During this period, Ecuador exhibited a challenging panorama. Public safety and violence crisis is unprecedented. Statistics reveal that Ecuador will end 2023 with a homicide rate of 40 per 100,000 inhabitants. During the first semester of this year, the police registered 3,513 murders, which means an increase of 58% compared to 2022 (Mella, 2023).

This generalized violence did not ignore the press and freedom of expression. Two journalists lost their lives in tragic circumstances, and a third remains missing. This heightens the vulnerability of newsmen in the country. Moreover, four journalists were forced to leave Ecuador due to death threats. This raises critical concern about the safety of those who work to inform the public.

Although the causes of this wave of violence are diverse, many experts agree that the central government is responsible for ignoring the issue. Despite attempts to improve the interaction with the press, the lack of an effective and proactive response to address the crisis has significantly worsened the state of freedom of the press in the country.

All this amid an early presidential election in Ecuador as President Lasso - after being in government for barely two years – declared a *cross-death* (an action that dissolves the national Assembly and calls for early elections) in May 2023. The reasons behind this decision were varied, but the unsuccessful management of violence and crime, marked his administration and were imprinted in popular consciousness as one of the main reasons for his early departure from power.

## Results Analysis

This decrease in the Index score is not surprising for this year as what could be considered as a perception of criminality until August 2022, has become an undeniable reality supported by solid figures (Chapultepec Index, 2022). In 2023 alone, *Fundamedios* already alerted of more than one hundred attacks against the press (Fundamedios, 2023). The Index also shows that the attacks were carried out by unknown perpetrators (58) and by the government itself (55). This last figure is remarkable because during the period surveyed - unlike the last reports - Ecuador did not have a national strike or a day of significant demonstrations, events that inevitably result in a confrontation between the forces of law and order, citizens, and the media.

In a context of generalized violence, the events that affected the press are alarming and exhibit the decline of the country under study. The deaths and disappearances of journalists, the forced exile of media professionals due to unprecedented threats, and other harassment actions, have induced an atmosphere of fear that puts the integrity of workers in the area at risk.

Accordingly, the report exhibits an increase in the negative influence of the three environments that comprise the Government, especially the executive.

### **On environments: In an Ecuador lacking an Assembly, the executive branch has the greatest responsibility for the deterioration**

With 2.56 points, the executive environment had a moderate unfavorable influence. Surprisingly, this figure translates into a slight improvement compared to the 2.66 obtained in the previous report. For academic Caroline Ávila (Ávila, 2023), the administration of Guillermo Lasso promised that relations between the government, the press and freedom of expression would improve. However, in practice, his administration was marked by incompetence at controlling violence and public safety, a circumstance that took a heavy toll on journalists.

During period surveyed, journalist Karol Noroña, from the digital media *GK*, in charge of covering the prison crisis, had to leave the country after receiving death threats from criminal organizations in a context in which the government lost control of prisons. *GK* described the threats against Noroña as "... another example of the public safety crisis, and the penetration of drug trafficking in the country pervading every sector of society" (Committee to Protect Journalists) (CPJ, 2023).

Another representative case corresponds to that of journalists Andersson Boscán and Mónica Velásquez of the digital media *La Posta*. Boscán and Velásquez were the obvious faces of the investigation known as "León de Troya", which exposed an alleged connection between the Albanian mafia and the entourage closest to President Guillermo Lasso. Through a statement, the media outlet blamed "President Guillermo Lasso for what may happen to the team of journalists" (El Universo, 2023). The decision to leave Ecuador "... has been taken after a responsible assessment of the facts, the confrontation of different sources, and the suggestion of international security representatives," the statement said.

The government is liable for its inability to guarantee the safety of all and, in particular, of media workers. This is revealed, not only in the aforementioned cases of forced exile, but also in the murder of journalists Gerardo Delgado Olmedo and César Henry Vivanco; and the disappearance of journalist Fernando León (Fundamedios, 2023).

The judicial environment in Ecuador obtained a score of 1.75; this represents a slight unfavorable influence and, moreover, an improvement compared to the 2.17 obtained in last

year's Index. This is the result of fewer judicial cases during this period compared to the previous one.

However, the unfavorable influence score in this environment was higher in the realm corresponding to the exercise of journalism, with a score of 3.00. Here, according to experts, is worth reflecting on the role of the Attorney General's Office. Caroline Ávila argues that the institution has been distinct by its inclination to reinforce certain narratives to the detriment of others (Ávila, 2023), which has turned this instance into a more political than technical player.

Ávila says this perception may apply to journalists, since, when presented with journalism research of great impact, the Attorney General's Office has not reacted decisively. An illustrative example of this is the "León de Troya" case, widely reported by *La Posta*, which, up to date, has not received a tangible follow-up by the Attorney General's Office. This practice repeated at previous cases, such as the *Pandora Papers* case linking President Guillermo Lasso, where no significant action by this government instance was observed either.

Analyzing the influence of the legislative environment is noteworthy. Here, the Index gives Ecuador a score of 2.08 versus 2.69 points obtained last year. Interestingly, however, is that since May 2023 Ecuador lacks a National Assembly, after President Lasso decreed the cross-death.

Despite this development, the survey exhibits that this environment has a moderate unfavorable influence of 4.17 on the realm corresponding to the exercise of journalism. One of the explanations for this perception is the co-responsibility the public give the Assembly for the public safety crisis the country is undergoing. Before being dissolved by the President, the Legislative Branch enjoyed a credibility rating of only 9% (La Hora, 2023).

### **Realm A: The second worst evaluated realm by this Index.**

The results in the Citizens Free to Express Themselves realm in Ecuador revealed decline compared to the previous year. The country obtained a score of 9.33, which contrasts with 12.7 attained the previous year. Experts agree that this decline corresponds to the atmosphere of self-censorship that prevails in the country as it was also explained in the last year's Chapultepec Index. There is growing tension and polarization between the followers of the political movement known as *correísmo* and *anti-correísmo* (a reference to ex-president Rafael Correa). The populace is reluctant to express their opinions, especially on social media, on fears of being subjected to excessive criticism from those who differ (Chapultepec Index, 2022). What is different this year is that members of the government have decreased their participation in this climate of tension, which adds a new element to the equation.

Another relevant event is the definitive de-circulation of the print version of the historic capital newspaper, *El Comercio* (El Universo, 2023). Although no government agency directly intervened in the newspaper's cessation of circulation, the lack of a strong response to the claims of former and current employees, who demanded government intervention to protect their labor rights, has raised concerns (Fundamedios, 2023).

Alternatively, a factor that could have contributed to avoid an even greater worsening in this realm is the government's issuance of the regulations of the long-awaited new Communication Law (Ley de Comunicación). This law, in theory, seeks to improve the working conditions of journalists and the media, as well as to promote diversity and plurality of communication in the country. Although its implementation and effectiveness will require continuous oversight, it represents a step in the right direction to strengthen freedom of the press and the participation of informed citizens in Ecuador (Primicias, 2023).

## **Realm B: An accelerated and worrisome deterioration**

The results in the realm of journalism in Ecuador were highly worrisome; with a score of 2.54, a significant decrease is observed in comparison to previous years. The executive environment had an outstanding negative influence, with a score of 5.33. These numbers were the result of the previously mentioned events: four journalists forced into exile, the tragic death of two journalists, the reception of explosives in some media outlets' mailbox, and reporters being forced to stay in the company of security officers to cover violent areas (CPJ, 2023). This situation has created an environment of danger and fear for media workers in Ecuador.

In this context of unprecedented violence, journalists are forced to take extreme security measures to report on organized crime. One example is that of Arturo Torres, who published a story with his name on it about the alleged leader of a criminal gang. The next day, a lawyer representing the individual mentioned in the article called Torres and urged him to remove the story from the website. Torres refused to do so and took further action, alerting the police and his contacts about the call. Despite receiving no further threats, Torres decided that he would not use his name when posting information that could jeopardize his safety (CPJ, 2023).

Finally, crime and the penetration of organized crime in Ecuadorian society have significantly undermined the ability of journalists to freely and safely practice their profession. The protection of media workers and the preservation of freedom of the press have become imperative challenges in the country.

## **Realm C: The worst indicator**

Ecuador obtained an upsetting score of 9.52 out of a possible 42 in the realm of Violence and Impunity, achieving the worst score in the Index for the nation. This indicates that, in this realm, Ecuador entered into the highly restricted category. Although the wave of violence is not restricted to journalism, it is difficult to distinguish - within popular consciousness - which segments of society it affects to a greater or lesser extent, which justifies the fact that this score exhibits a generalized and undefined perception.

In this context, the exercise of journalism is almost a heroic task. A look into some data is enough to prove it: In 2022, Ecuador had experienced the worst wave of criminal violence with a rate of 25 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants, and by 2023, it is projected to close with an even more alarming rate of 40 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants (González, 2023).

An *InSight Crime* report (Crisis Group, 2022) has stressed the diverse transnational criminal overview in Ecuador, dominated by Colombian insurgent and criminal groups, as well as the presence of Mexican cartels. In addition, Albanian traffickers have established a presence in the country, moving significant quantities of cocaine to Europe.

## **Realm D: A positive angle within a challenging reality**

Ecuador has been gradually improving in this realm. In 2021, the score was 17.7 (out of a possible 25); 18.8 in 2022; and now it is 19.00. This trend does correspond to the discourse of Guillermo Lasso's government, which, from the very beginning of his administration, prevented the use of public media as loudspeakers for the official versions. It is not entirely clear whether this decision is due to the government's conviction, or whether it responds to the fact that this

administration gradually lost strength and always contemplated the possibility of leaving power, as indeed happened after the cross death decree.

In any case, it is clear that President Lasso marked a clear distance from his political opponent, the *Correism*. The latter was always criticized for its conflictive relationship with the private media, and for its political use of the public media. This did not happen with the current administration.

## Conclusions

The deep crisis of violence in Ecuador set the tone for this year's report. It is impossible to separate crime and violence from any analysis of the situation of freedom of expression and freedom of the press. It was already stated, in the conclusions of the 2022 report, that the government stated that violence and organized crime were emerging as new threats. Today, these are a current reality. Consequently, the incidents that have impacted the press display the country's decline in this survey. The negative influence of the three environments that make up the government, especially the executive branch, has intensified.

In the executive environment, the government of Guillermo Lasso promised to improve the relationship with the press, but in practice, it was overshadowed by a wave of violence and insecurity that took its toll on journalists and the entire field corresponding to freedom of expression. Cases such as the forced exile of Karol Noroña, the *La Posta* journalistic team threatened for its investigation "León de Troya", and the lack of security during press coverage, show the government's inability to guarantee the safety of media workers.

In the judicial environment, despite a slight improvement, the Attorney General's Office has been criticized for its tendency to reinforce certain narratives. Some media sectors wonder why the institution pushes for prosecutions based on journalistic research in some cases, and not in others.

Despite the dissolution of the National Assembly in May 2023, the legislative environment has a negative influence on the realm of the exercise of journalism. The populace considers that the Assembly is also responsible for the public safety crisis in the country.

In the realm of Citizens Free to Express Themselves, a decline has been observed in comparison with the previous year due to the climate of self-censorship and polarization. The shutdown of the printed version of *El Comercio* newspaper raises concerns about the lack of a firm response from the government to the demands of media workers. However, the enactment of a new Communications Law could represent a positive step towards strengthening freedom of the press and the participation of informed citizenry in Ecuador.

In general, Ecuador faces serious challenges in all the realms and environments under survey in this report. Violence and crime have left a permanent mark on Ecuadorian society, undermining the work of journalists and freedom of the press. Although the central government has a key responsibility in this crisis, citizen perception also points to the Assembly -despite the fact that it was dissolved in May of this year- as co-responsible for the situation.

Ecuador is transiting a difficult road towards restoring security and protecting freedom of expression. This will be a task for the next president-elect, Daniel Noboa, who will govern until 2025. In principle, Noboa comes to power with a similar discourse to Lasso's in respect to freedom of expression. The latter was not able to consolidate his good intentions; it remains to see if the new President will be able to do so.

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