

## HONDURAS

### UNSTABLE CONDITIONS TO PRACTICE JOURNALISM

#### Executive Summary

There is no change in the adverse conditions faced by the media and the journalists in relation to recent years, since the current government promotes a socialist ideology akin to the governments of the Sao Paulo Forum that, in some way, restrict free speech. The government of the Republic has strengthened the run-by-the-State media, with which they intend to spread reports, projects and proposals made by the regime while omitting the help of mainstream media. According to some complaints, the government has hired a company from abroad to manage social media, which has devoted itself to charging against the political opposition, journalists and media outlets that do not subscribe to the socialist ideology.

#### Introduction

In Honduras Index, during the current survey's period, August 2nd, 2022 to August 1st, 2023 period, it peaked at 36.50 points, lower than the nation's overall index previous edition, when it hit 47.84 points. We can point out a notable decline in ratings and freedom of expression limited by political ideology. It is evident that over the last years the State's determination about freedom of expression and the press has progressively deteriorated, as the score dropped nearly 10 points.

This August 1st, 2022 to August 31st, 2023 period report encompasses current President Iris Xiomara Castro Sarmiento's second year of government. She is the first woman to attain this important position in Honduras' history.

The current regime has advanced a new Tax Justice Act aiming at repealing tax exemptions and waivers, thereby generating legal uncertainty, political instability and a confrontation involving the media, since anyone who does not support this legal entity turned into an enemy by the current administration. (El Criterio HN, 2023).

President Castro came to power amid many promises and expectations from the society while fighting public corruption. Some offers have been fulfilled, but many are still pending; for example, the Law of Secrets, a motor for opacity and lack of transparency in most actions by the government, has been repealed. This law greatly allowed corruption in the Republic, but it is still uncertain with the arrival of the International Commission Against Corruption and Impunity (Comisión Internacional de Combate a la Corrupción, CICIH) that has not been able to be installed due to different factors adverse to the current government. (Contra Corriente, 2023).

## **About the environments institutions acting against freedom of expression**

After almost two years of government, President Castro has not given a single open and unrestricted press conference, rather some scattered interviews where State control has been more than evident, thereby reflecting limitations in the openness and opinion of the President, who just communicates her actions through Facebook and X (former Twitter). Frustration is widespread because many political offerings were made and to the date none has been met. (Expediente Público, 2023).

On the other hand, the role the government has given to social media has been fundamental, as the current administration has used them to highlight achievements, sponsor actors from the Zelaya-Castro family surroundings and attack opposition supporters. Moreover, powering state media outlets has not yielded the expected results, since rating levels are not based on the popular support that mainstream media still have.

In some proceedings, the Executive Branch remains with the same behavior and actions of the previous regime, trying to force its will onto other branches of the government. For example, in the election of the Supreme Court of Justice there was enormous influence and meddling from the President's advisor, husband and former President of the Republic, Jose Manuel Zelaya Rosales. In the election of the attorney general of the Republic there has been enormous pressure for her to get someone from political party Libertad y Refundación (Libre) designed for the position.

Regarding the Legislative, since the beginning of the President's administration, the board of directors was elected irregularly, since they were not backed by the votes of the proprietary representatives for their election. (Expediente Público, 2022). The breakdown of the alliance that brought party Libre to power has been transferred to the House of Representatives, leaving the ruling party practically alone, which has complicated things for a legislation allowing harmonious governance and development for Honduras. (El Criterio HN, 2022).

The ruling party does not have a simple majority, much less qualified to approve laws, abuses have been committed in the promulgation of said projects, for example, joining the Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean (Banco de Desarrollo de América Latina y el Caribe, CAF), "was issued in Diario La Gaceta Oficial despite the fact that the Honduran Parliament did not ratify the act of incorporation of the country into the regional financial entity". (Swissinfo, 2023).

The National Congress has been unable to legislate, as its president Luis Redondo has not had the leadership and the ability for dialogue to lead a productive legislation process that generates development. Currently, the National Congress has not been in session for 41 days due to lack of consensus among political forces. (El Mundo, 2023).

During this president's office period, a new Supreme Court of Justice was elected to replace a completely discredited judicial branch. The ruling party had to establish an alliance with the National Party and the Liberal Party to elect the 15 judges who will be in charge of justice in the next 7 years.

The influence of political forces on this election was clear and raises many doubts if this new Judiciary is going to reduce impunity and corruption in Honduras. The entire population has expectations about the results brought by the new elected judges. "Eyes are on the 15 judges who will have to deal with years of delays in the delivery of justice, in which advocates were imprisoned and crooks were set free". (El Criterio HN, 2023).

The new president of the Supreme Court of Justice, Rebeca Raquel Obando, is close to the president's family and has not yet offered an extensive press conference to explain how she will approach the serious problems present in that government's branch. Expectations about the new Supreme Court of Justice are high, since the previous administration left a trail of corruption unprecedented in the history of Honduras.

### **Realm A. Honduran Citizens Free to Express Themselves**

The assessment of the institution's action of Citizens Free to Express Themselves hits 4.67 out of possible 23.00 possible. The perception stems from the fact that in Honduras there is a high degree of polarization that has increased since the coup d'état that occurred in 2009. This division in society generated a political, economic and even familial crisis between the rich and the poor, excluded, marginalized and beneficiaries of the system.

Hate campaigns by the right against the left, by the poor against the rich and vice versa and of workers against entrepreneurs are on a daily basis and if the topic pops in media, this previously non-existing and so-far unhealed polarization crawls out.

After the coup d'état, the right rose in power through the National Party, deepening this division, generating public corruption and human rights violations. Now that a left-leaning party such as Libre wins, the narrative of the working class against owners and the control over the media through different mechanisms that restrict freedom of expression is back. One of the methods is media campaigns against adversaries on social media.

### **Realm B. Conditions exist to exercise journalism**

The assessment regarding situations unfavorable to freedom of expression, specifically in the exercise of journalism, is 4.44 points out of 10.00. The conditions for journalists and newspeople to exercise objective and impartial journalism are increasingly complex, since the administration of president Xiomara has an openly confrontational campaign against all sectors, including the press and the media, just because when some errors, lack of transparency, abuses in the exercise of power are pointed out, their main spokespersons lash out with personal attacks against those who oppose them.

The press criticizes excessive traveling with inconsequential outcomes among others, but the Castro Zelaya administration does not reply transparently to the expenses it is incurring abroad in addition to aspects that they were critical on regarding the past public administration, which they are doing again. "In the midst of a governance crisis that has kept the legislative activity of the National Congress paralyzed for a month, Luis Redondo announced the visit to Russia with a large delegation of congresspersons". (The Herald, 2023). Much of the information on the Single Transparency Portal does not show confidential and protected information, which makes it possible to hide from the press all the details related to the expenses incurred by these numerous delegations.

Honduran journalism has expected more forceful decisions against public corruption; for example, CNA's head Gabriela Castellanos has on several occasions questioned the lack of transparency and accountability of the current administration, being heavily criticized, attacked and threatened by government spokespersons and throughout this debate, freedom of expression is increasingly vulnerable.

## **Realm C: Violence and Impunity**

The current situation in Honduras as to violence and impunity against media employees' associations is 14.84 out of 43.00. The exercise of journalism continues to be a risky professional activity, and although in the last year there have been no murdered journalists, danger, violence, and attacks do not recede. "The public authorities do not like us to inform, they like to keep all this information hidden and hence, we must strengthen investigative journalism so that all matters that are of public interest come to light, not of the interest of the media, of politicians or ruling groups." (Digital Process, 2023).

"21 complaints by journalists and newspeople were taken care of in 2023's first months. They reported to be at risk or be victims of forced displacement from the country" (Conadeh, 2023). This exceeds the 20 applications from the previous year, the highest number since 2020. Currently, the protection for journalists' index rates 1.33 points out of a possible 5.00, meaning little to no interest in protecting those who represent the voice of the entire nation.

On the other hand, according to information corresponding to Diario El Herald, "the data reveal that only between 2022 and 2023 there were physical attacks, aggression, complaints in court, threats, harassment, intimidation and the death of six media-related people" (The Herald, 2023). Likewise, to date, the murder of 96 journalists and media employees remains in total impunity.

## **Realm D: Control over the media**

Regarding control over the media in situations unfavorable to freedom of expression, Honduras has a rating of 12.56 points out of possible 25.00. Because the administration maintains its position of not offering advertising guidelines to mainstream media (until recently it began this advertising process), the control that other governments used as a way to silence the media has practically not existed.

Many journalists and media outlets have unleashed their offensive on evident nepotism (the so-called "familión del gobierno", relatives close to the president hired in public positions), in which the head of the National Anticorruption Council pointed out that "the Cabinet looks like a family tree"), as well as the failure in executing a budget, the ineffectiveness of many ministers, the inner struggle in the Libre party, among others. (The Herald, 2023).

The lack of control and the existence of a minister of strategy and media who has been offensive, hostile and threatening against media businesspeople and owners has created a rift between the administration and the media, causing the president to have a dramatic decline in its acceptance and popularity worsened by the international economic crisis, high inflation rates, increases in fuel prices and opposition supporters united in a political bloc that has prevented harmonious legislation with the Executive.

## **Conclusions**

According to the country's rating regarding freedom of expression, taking as reference the opinion of IAPA experts in Honduras, 36.50 out of 100.00 possible points reflect a high restriction on the exercise of journalism in Honduras in the face of a government with a socialist ideology that seeks to force upon its regime on all sectors of the population.

The legislative crisis in the National Congress that is rooted in the election of the board of directors has caused the ruling party to commit several excesses in order to force its will, for example, the approval of joining a South American Development Bank, the election of the Supreme Court of Justice and soon the election of the attorney general of the Republic.

The Castro Zelaya administration has wanted to force upon a new model of government that dangerously borders the regimes of Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela, in which fundamental rights of expression have been violated, but this ideological proposal may not thrive because many sectors strongly oppose this proposal.

The country has maintained high rates of violence, crime and impunity, which is not unrelated to the exercise of journalism, and although the homicide rates against journalists and newspeople have not increased considerably, conditions in the country are not so favorable (several journalists have left the country, self-exiling whether because of threats from the government or adverse working conditions to be defined).

The role of social media from which the Honduran people get informed about the ongoing events in the nation has downplayed the importance of mainstream media and the role of newspeople who work in them, which creates a dangerous situation for the future.

The government has not been able to produce a harmonious country-running policy with the owners of the media allowing for the generation of massive employment, the improvement of the country's image and the strengthening of the rule of law. Far from that, the administration has set spokespersons for the current regime to denigrate and smear businessmen (including media owners), fueling permanent hostility between the government and the media.

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