

## **HONDURAS ADVERSE WEATHER FOR FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND THE MEDIA**

### **Executive Summary**

The atmosphere of hostility that government officials have fostered, plus a policy of little transparency in public information and accountability, coupled with impunity for crimes against journalists and communicators, reflect the precarious situation of press freedom development faced by journalists and human rights defenders in Honduras. In 2024, the media continued to be intimidated; In addition, a list of journalists who are allegedly benefited from advertising by the current regime was released. In this period of the report, a confrontational discourse of the socialist government against private enterprise, the opposition, the media and journalists continued.

### **Introduction**

Since the beginning of the government of President Xiomara Castro and her social democratic government, the leadership of the party she leads, Libertad y Refundación (Libre), promoted a campaign of confrontation, hatred and attack on private enterprise and the traditional media, describing them as oligarchs who supported what they call the narco-dictatorship (government of Juan Orlando Hernández). In their narrative they used terms such as exploiters, corrupt and attributed to them having colluded with the past regime to promote projects that affected the country.

This campaign against the traditional media, through social networks, bots and spokespeople of the current regime, has generated a climate of open and hostile confrontation between the government and the news companies. Advertising spending continued to be used as a tool of political manipulation, favoring a select group of journalists and media outlets.

Finally, several government institutions that manage projects with external funds refuse to provide information on financial reports, budget settlements, travel expenses, payrolls, operating expenses, trusted personnel, training, vehicle rental, among others.

### **Analysis of results**

Regarding the general classification of Honduras, in the period from August 2, 2023 to August 1, 2024, a score of 39.85 points was obtained, lower than the overall index of 48.18 points. We can point to a slight increase in the rating compared to the previous review period, a freedom of expression that is limited by political colors and a polarization of information in general. It is evident that in recent years freedom of expression has been deteriorating, as Honduras remains one of the countries with a high restriction of thought and opinion.

The government has dedicated itself to the task of stigmatizing journalists and media outlets that report on wrong decisions, and this maintains a tense and violent environment. Out of 180

countries in the world, Honduras is ranked 169th in terms of freedom of expression (Proceso HN, 2024).

The use of official and personal social networks to respond virulently against leaders and opposition parties by government officials such as the Minister of Strategy and now also of Communication, Ricardo Salgado, reflects intolerance and lack of receptivity in the opinion of the general population.

### **Legislative Branch**

According to the measurement, the degree of influence in situations unfavorable to freedom of expression of the legislative environment is strong. The National Congress was paralyzed for several months due to an ungovernability that has the political opposition and the ruling party as its main actors. Its president, Luis Redondo, has not been able to manage a coherent and prioritized agenda on the real problems that Honduras has in terms of health, security, education, social crisis, etc., since the party in power has lost a number of deputies and this does not favor it for the approval of some laws.

The Legislative Branch continues to deliver bonuses, subsidies and other benefits to its like-minded deputies to consolidate its number of congressmen and try to build a simple and qualified majority that supports the administration of President Xiomara Castro, but this has not been enough, since the Libertad and Refundación (Libre) party has been left alone, unable to articulate bills that allow it to build an agenda for the benefit of the country. In the midst of all this legislative crisis has been the national press.

On another issue related to the Legislative Branch, "The Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), Eduardo Bertoni, urged the Government of Honduras to eliminate from its legislation the mandatory membership of journalists and laws that criminalize offensive expression directed at public officials, generally known as "disrespect laws."

### **Executive Branch**

The Executive Branch shows a rating of influence against freedom of expression of 5.41 out of ten possible points. This, to a large extent, is due to the fact that some radical figures of the current government do not stop attacking the "corporate" media and argue that they are against the government because they lost the privileges granted to them by the government of Juan Orlando Hernández, stigmatizing these media and their journalists.

"The confrontational, disqualifying and stigmatizing discourse of many officials has caused a more polarized environment in Honduran society," increasing the risk of having higher levels of conflict than those of the previous year. (HN Process, 2024) To counteract the "disinformation" against the government, the current regime promotes the official media as well as permanent attacks through social networks, disqualifying anyone who criticizes its management.

According to his narrative, some media are accomplices of the *narco-dictatorship*, as they obtained juicy contracts to silence what was happening in the country. Government advertising to benefit some friends and associates of the regime has continued, as in the previous government, which shows that both administrations, that of Juan Orlando Hernández and the current one, continue to use advertising as a tool for their interests.

## **Judicial Branch**

The degree of influence of the Judiciary is the lowest of the three, with a score of 3.04 out of ten possible points; the President of the Court, lawyer Rebeca Raquel has had a very discreet participation and away from the internal confrontation with her colleagues from the branches of the Government. She has a very low profile and his public appearances are very sporadic. Their relationship with the media is almost non-existent, it was expected to have a much closer relationship, to know the main cases and trials of national interest. The decisions made by the Judiciary are not made known to the population, except in cases of greater impact.

Recently, Judge Marco Vallecillo, who served in the Courts of Organized Crime and Corruption, was accused of extortion by the State Prosecutor's Office, which required him for having received 3,000,000 lempiras (about USD 120,500.00 US dollars); Vallecillo said that this money was going to be delivered to a relative of a very high authority in the Supreme Court of Justice. A day later, the president of the Court asked that everything related to this scandal be investigated.

This fact provoked a thorough investigation by the leadership of the Judiciary, but to date the results of the investigations are not known. Public opinion has brought to the fore the alleged corruption in the Judiciary and the collusion of organized crime with judges and auxiliary personnel within this branch of the Government.

## **Realm of Informed Citizenship Free to Express Themselves**

The rating of Informed Citizens Free to Express Themselves is 9.00 out of thirty possible points. The polarization of society, the confrontational environment that the current administration has implemented at all levels, and the upcoming internal and general elections (2025) make this year difficult for freedom of expression and the press.

"2024 and the following years are seen as another time of battle against aggression, harassment, intimidation, attacks, forced displacement, assaults and even death, this time adding the fight against the phenomenon of disinformation" (*El Heraldo*, 2024).

The government uses social networks with violence to discredit messages from the political opposition and insult spokespeople who contrast its political philosophy. Recently, the Minister of Strategy and Communication, Ricardo Salgado, in one of the forums with the highest *ratings* on a national scale, attacked, denigrated and insulted the panelists for not agreeing with the government's policies, which meant a new act of intolerance by the current regime.

## **Realm of Violence and Impunity against Journalists and the Media**

The score obtained by Honduras in this Realm is 6.35 out of twenty possible points. The average for the region is 7.6 points, which shows that, despite the decrease in murders against social communicators, in relation to previous years, Honduras continues to be an extremely complex and delicate country to carry out objective and impartial journalism.

Currently, the National Protection System for Human Rights Defenders and Journalists was dismantled by the former Minister of Human Rights, leaving unprotected many journalists who

have been threatened for their profession, greatly limiting the free and safe exercise of their profession.

By January of this year, 101 journalists and social communicators have been murdered in the last decade. The last one, a social communicator from the interior of the country, Luis Alonzo Teruel, who, according to versions, "had opposed a project that has a strong environmental impact and irregular hydroelectric concessions, in fact, denounced on several occasions the impacts on people's lives, without his accusation being heard." He is one more victim and an unpunished case that joins the rest of the cases that are waiting for justice. (*Conexihon*, 2024).

"Every 38 hours there is an attack against journalists, social communicators, the media and the defense of human rights in Honduras" (*Conexihon*, 2024). The data reflect a 262% increase in alerts, compared to the previous year. Most of the manifestations of violence are intimidation, discredit, insults, among others; which threatens and represents an alert about freedom of expression in the country.

### **Realm of Media and Journalist Control**

The rating of Media Control and Journalism was 18.17 out of thirty possible points; At present, despite the direct attack by government officials on different unions and the media, there has been no direct control or closure of traditional media outlets.

The population, in general, makes use of social networks and messages and calls to the media to express their approval or disagreement with the decisions of President Castro's regime, without repercussions of persecution by the country's armed authorities. However, many of the current government officials disagree with the criticism and block a significant number of citizens who show a position or ideology different from their own.

As for indirect government control of the media, the vast majority of their owners have depended on state advertising to cover campaign achievements and promises. There are few media outlets that maintain an impartial stance and make objective articles and reports on the impacts of the decisions of the current rulers, and that adhere to the commitment to investigate acts of corruption and impunity.

Some digital media receive support from international organizations, which allows them to remain objective and combative against the current regime.

### **Conclusions**

In relation to the Judiciary, one of the cases that has generated the greatest impact on public opinion was the capture of an anti-corruption judge implicated in an alleged bribe of USD 120,500. Absolute secrecy was decreed and no further details were given about the origin and those involved in this immoral act; This prerogative of judges, to withhold information, generates speculation and violation of freedom of expression, as well as disinformation in the population that has the right to know who violates the law for their own benefit.

The Executive Branch has been confronting the policies of the United States and eliminated the Extradition Law for characters involved in activities related to drug trafficking; this, without

having a valid justification. As a result of this abrupt decision, the digital media *InsightCrime* released a video of the former national secretary and brother of the presidential advisor (former President José Manuel Zelaya), and brother-in-law of President Xiomara Castro, Deputy Carlos Zelaya, who, according to complaints, trades illicit money for the political campaign of the ruling party with drug lords operating in Honduras.

In the Legislative Branch, facing the last year of government, the weakening of the Libre bench in the National Congress is evident, as one of its iconic leaders withdrew from his bench to join the Liberal Party of Honduras; this fact has caused the Libre Party not even to be able to file a report or bill of its interest, that laws that are pending are not approved and that President Castro's campaign promises are not fulfilled.

With respect to citizens free to express themselves, social networks have contributed significantly to the dissemination and reception of messages that are not related to the government. In Honduras, the most popular social network is Facebook, with a great advance of TikTok at the popular level and the X network, which in the country is a dissemination tool used by government officials, businessmen, civil society and religious leaders.

Another pending aspect for the next period of study is that the murder of more than 101 journalists and social communicators remains unpunished, which shows that the Judiciary has not acted diligently. Journalism, law, and human rights defenders continue to be some of the highest-risk professions to practice in Honduras.

Social networks will be the most influential and persuasive tool in the upcoming primary and general elections, as they are more accessible, expeditious and economical in their advertising.

In Honduras, the climate of hostility, insecurity and self-censorship of the media and journalists by governments that want to impose their truth, minimizing the failures and extolling the few works they develop, continues. The media, using discretionary advertising, extortion, threats and bribes, are forced to disseminate messages that interest the regime.

Unfortunately, Honduras faces permanent economic crises, increased poverty, underdevelopment, corruption, poor institutions and weakening of the rule of law, which makes the practice of journalism increasingly difficult and complex and an environment of threat and confrontation prevails.

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