

## **Ecuador**

### **The violent and threatening context continues**

#### **Executive Summary**

Ecuador has bounced back modestly in the Chapultepec Index, scoring 46.03 points, while it had previously obtained 43.85. However, the situation is not to be considered an overall improvement. The violence that shook the country in 2023 seems to have receded, but the dangers remain evident. The Violence and Impunity realm is an ongoing challenge, as 172 events involving threats and attacks on journalists have been reported. Moreover, organized crime continues to be a main player as for violence, while a presidential runner-up's murder in August 2023 stands out.

#### **Introduction**

Between August 2023 and July 2024, Ecuador has experienced some progress in "Control Over the Media and Journalism" and "Citizens Free to Express Themselves". One explanation is that Daniel Noboa's taking office in November 2023 relieved the relationship between the media and the authorities. However, although these changes have improved some aspects, the reality stays complex and the government has shown signs of straining relations with critical media and newspersons. Thereby, full freedom of expression still seems far away.

On the other hand, the persecution of journalists has peaked to distressing levels during this period. Five journalists have been forced to leave the country, and have gone into exile for various reasons. Some of them have escaped due to the escalation in organized-crime-related violence, which has drastically transformed the nation's landscape. Others have been directly persecuted for their work critical of the government. The case of Alondra Santiago, who had to go into exile after her visa was revoked because of a video in which she used the national anthem to criticize the president, Daniel Noboa, may be the most disturbing example of retaliation triggering by being politically criticism (DW, 2024).

In this context of violence and impunity, attacks by organized crime have also affected the media in a direct manner. One of the most shocking episodes was by members from organized crime storming the *TC Television* station facilities while one of its programs was going on the air, so that thousands of viewers witnessed on their screens how men in hoods aimed their weapons at journalists and media employee. After the event, Daniel Noboa declared a state of internal war in the country. (*BBC News Mundo*, 2024). This attack reflects not only the growing power of these organizations, but also the climate of insecurity in which journalists and the media are forced to do their jobs.

#### **Results Analysis**

Scoring 3.62 in its general unfavorable influence, the Executive environment in Ecuador had the worst grading out of the three environments analyzed in the Index. This score reflects a moderate, but worrying, intervention by the Executive in the area of freedom of the press. The figure has surely an explanation from the fact that Ecuador, a historically presidential country, remains under the strong influence of the Head of State, which translates into recurring tensions between the government and the media.

The Executive environment had its lowest score at the Citizens Free to Express Themselves realm, showing a 5.05 strong unfavorable influence. Under President Daniel Noboa's administration, freedom of information and expression have been limited. A paradigmatic case is that of the aforementioned journalist Alondra Santiago, who was forced into exile after her visa was revoked. Likewise, the axing of the "Los Irreverentes" show, known for its blunt anti-Executive branch stance, bolsters the perception that the central power continues to exert pressure on independent media (Ochoa, 2024). Newspersons have pointed out that the show's axing was the result of direct pressure from the Executive, thereby generating a self-censorship atmosphere.

Regarding Control over the Media and Journalism, the score is 2.48. Although the Executive branch has an unfavorable influence, this is the least impactful realm. Unlike other analyzed periods, in the present one the Executive has not taken direct verifiable and documented actions to control a media outlet. However, the Violence and Impunity against Media and Journalists context remains distressing as it scores 3.33, indicating a moderate influence. The Executive is not directly responsible for many of the attacks, but it has been evidently sluggish to provide protection for journalists. In addition, local authorities, such as the mayor of Quilanga (Fundamedios, 2023) and the Chief of Police of Esmeraldas, have intimidated journalists in recent events, thereby showing hostility set towards journalism in several realms of political power.

Now, let us talk about the Legislative environment. The 1.67 score reflects a mild intervention by the Executive in the area of freedom of the press. This is largely due to the Legislative's political submission to the Executive during this period, especially after the new administration took office. Unlike other environments, the Legislative has not exerted significant pressure on the media or generated direct obstacles to journalistic work.

An explanation for this score is also the fact that the Legislative has made important progress during this period: the approval of the Organic Act of Communication's general regulations. This long-year overdue regulation allowed the implementation of devices for the prevention and protection of the press' work, a key tool to safeguard the practice of journalism in an ever-increasingly dangerous environment. Although the Legislative has not been the main player in Ecuadorian politics in this time, this step represents a relevant milestone for the safety of journalists.

Another factor that explains the Legislative's low influence is the "muerte cruzada" (mutual death) called in May 2023 by former President Guillermo Lasso, which resulted back then in the immediate dissolution of the National Parliament. This measure temporarily halted the Legislative's functions and lessened its impact for much of the analyzed period. The new Parliament was installed only in November 2023, and is still being set as a significant political player.

Scoring 1.65, the Judiciary environment in Ecuador ranks as the least negative influence on freedom of the press and expression. This low rating is due, partially, to the lower number of judicial events reported in the analysis of this period.

Despite its low overall influence, the score goes up to 2.10 when its impact on the Citizens Free to Express Themselves realm is under scrutiny. This raise reflects the perception, identified in previous reports, that the Judiciary branch has acted as a political player rather than an aide in certain cases. According to analyst Caroline Ávila (Ecuador's Chapultepec Index, 2023), the Attorney General's Office has shown a tendency to favor certain narratives while weakening others, which generates distrust among the media and the journalists. This bias has been clear in highly relevant media cases that have not been timely responded to by the Attorney General's Office. For instance, we are referring to the investigation called "León de Troya" disclosed by the digital medium *La Posta*, which has not yet been properly addressed by the institution.

This sluggish or lacking pattern of judicial follow-up was also observed in previous investigations, such as the case of the *Pandora Papers*, which involved former President Guillermo Lasso. The lack of important intervention by the Attorney General's Office in these episodes bolsters the perception that the Judiciary environment does not act unbiasedly or efficiently when the media looks into high-profile matters.

### **Realm Citizens Free to Express Themselves**

Ecuador recorded some progress by scoring 13.71 at the Citizens Free to Express Themselves realm, compared to last year's 9.33. This improvement reflects a greater information flow and more open public free speech, although the country still needs to address important challenges in this regard. Despite the progress, freedom of the press and expression is far from being complete, while tensions and restrictions still surround the conditions for journalists to do their job.

A novelty in this report is the inclusion of a sub realm for the State's actions in the face of disinformation, in which Ecuador scored low: 1.57 out of ten. This evinces an ongoing problem with the dissemination of inaccurate information. A significant example was President Daniel Noboa's speech on youth employment creation. In February 2024, the government claimed to have created nearly 50,000 new jobs for young people; this figure diverted attention from the fact that more terminations than new hires were recorded between the months of December 2023 and February 2024. Officially, nearly 97,500 new employment contracts were created during that time, but almost 102,000 termination contracts were also registered. The lack of an accurate narrative lets the intention to introduce perceptions that favor the Executive branch known, thereby affecting the ability of citizens to access truthful and balanced information.

We must also highlight, once again, two events that reflect government and the media tensions: Alondra Santiago's case and the axing "Los Irreverentes", known for its critical stance towards the Executive branch. According to Fundación Periodistas Sin Cadena, both cases are part of Daniel Noboa government's political strategy seeking to control the media narrative as they face the 2025 presidential elections. This control over the narrative, based on the creation of antagonisms with the media, aims at consolidating power and limit dissenting voices in an ever-increasingly polarized political context. (Periodistas Sin Cadena, 2024).

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

Violence and Impunity against Journalists and Media has recorded a slight deterioration in this period, when it scored 9.46 out of forty available points, compared to the previous report's 9.52. Although the variation is minimal, the reported events show an alarming reality for the work of the press in Ecuador.

Among those events, a landmark was the *TC Televisión* storming, an event that shows how organized crime has become big in the country. Additionally, journalist, politician and presidential runner-up Fernando Villavicencio's murder and the subsequent threat from the Jalisco Nueva Generación Cartel against substitute candidate Christian Zurita demonstrated how organized crime not only influences politics, but also the security and freedom of those who investigate and disseminate information (Fundamedios, 2023).

Violence has pushed numerous journalists into exile. During this period, five newsmen, newsmen, media employees left the country for safety reasons. In addition to the aforementioned Alondra Santiago's case, there are also those of Andersson Boscán and Mónica Velásquez, who went into exile in September 2024 after learning that criminal groups were planning to assassinate them by criminal groups. The affected denounced how ineffective and sluggish the Attorney General's Office –which had the report by the National Police in its possession– has acted upon investigating these events, as it reveals a pattern of impunity and lack of protection of media employees by the State.

This realm's deterioration speaks of an escalating crisis that affects the safety of newsmen in Ecuador, where organized crime has gained ground and the government has not provided effective responses, thereby worsening impunity.

### **Realm Control Over The Media and Journalism**

Control Over The Media and Journalism has shown remarkable improvement in this period, with an overall score of 22.86, compared to 19.00 in the previous report. Despite this progress, it is important to note that the situation remains far from ideal. Although there has been no evidence of recent attempts by the government to apply direct control over the media, a historical dark aspect remains: since 2008, the Ecuadorian Government has confiscated seventeen private media outlets, of which only two are still in business. This fact has largely been normalized in the country, and is a reminder of the government's ability to interfere with the media.

*TC Televisión* and *Gamavisión*, the two state media outlets that remain operational, are known for disseminating narratives supporting the government in power's interests. Although they are representative of a majority, their influence is considerable due to their range (especially *TC television*) and their ability to broadcast official information. This underscores a problem in which, although direct control over the media is limited, the use of state media to disseminate certain narratives creates a media environment that can condition access to impartial and critical information.

Despite the lack of explicit attempts to control the media in this period, there is still concern that the inertia from the past continues to affect the relationship between the media and the government. On the other hand, the bankruptcy or termination of fifteen out of the seventeen media outlets confiscated in 2008 reflects the negative impact that these government actions have had on the information plurality of the country.

### **Conclusions**

The conclusions of this report disclose a challenging reality around freedom of expression and journalism in Ecuador. In terms of government branch environments, the Executive Branch remains the most problematic, scoring an unfavorable 3.62, which shows moderate intervention in freedom of the press. However, the Executive branch's negative

influence on the Citizens Free to Express Themselves realm is 5.05 (strong influence). The reality is that under Daniel Noboa's administration, tensions with critical media and newsmen have continued. We recall again the cases Alondra Santiago and the axing of "Los Irreverentes".

On the other hand, the Judiciary environment, despite its lower negative influence with a score of 1.65, is not safe from raising concerns. Although during this period fewer judicial events reported, the perception that the judiciary shows political bias to act upon certain cases remains relevant. Attorney General's Office failure to do something in key investigations such as the "Lion of Troy" case and the Pandora Papers has undermined confidence in this office. Likewise, the report filed by two journalists who went into exile —Andersson Boscán and Mónica Velásquez— to the Attorney General's Office for inaction in the face of reports that were in the institution and evidenced an organized crime's plan to assassinate them, bolsters the idea that the office follows an agenda of its own.

The Legislative environment's 1.67 score reflects mild intervention and lesser impact in freedom of the press. This is largely due to the device of the "muerte cruzada" that temporarily dissolved the National Parliament in 2023 and the political submission to the Executive. However, it is noteworthy the approval of the Organic Act of Communication's general regulation, which implemented protection devices for the work of the press. This progress is an important milestone towards the safety of media employees in an ever-increasingly dangerous context, although the real impact of this measure remains to be seen.

In terms of the realms, the most distressing is Violence and Impunity against Media and Journalists, which shows deterioration as it scored 9.46. Reported events such as the murder presidential runner-up Fernando Villavicencio and the threatening of Christian Zurita, his substitute, reflect how the power of organized crime has become big and the lack of an effective response from the government. The outflow of journalists for safety reasons, together with failure to protect and delayed judicial investigations, shape the impunity and latent risk in doing press work in Ecuador.

In contrast, Citizens Free to Express Themselves improved significantly as it scored 13.71. Despite the advances in information flow and exerting of the right to free speech, the emergence of new problems, such as misinformation, reveals new challenges. The low score in this last sub-realm, 1.57 out of ten, shows how the Government has tried to influence the public narrative by disseminating inaccurate or incomplete information, thereby affecting the quality of public discussion and access to truthful information.

Control Over the Media and Journalism is the one that shows the greatest progress as it scored 22.86. There have been no recent attempts at direct control by the government, but the history of media outlets confiscation retains a residual impact. State media outlets, *TC Televisión* and *Gamavisión*, still serve as platforms that broadcast the government's narratives, raising concerns about the diversity of information in the country. Although this realm shows improvement, there is still a need to strengthen the plurality of independent media and ensure that state control does not condition access to critical and objective information.

Finally, looking ahead to next year, we will have to focus on a new electoral process. After what happened to Villavicencio and the increasing presence of organized crime, it is clear that this period poses a significant risk for journalists. In addition, we will have to closely monitor a trend that, until a couple of years ago, was foreign to Ecuador: the exile of journalists.

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