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Americas - Honduras

Sad anniversary

Media still gagged five years after coup

28 June 2014

Freedom of information has declined dramatically in Honduras in the five years since the coup d'état of 28 June 2009. The violent crackdown and censorship that marked the first few months after the coup have been followed ever since by constant violations of human rights and media rights.

The current president, Juan Orlando Hernández is a fervent advocate of "security by all possible means." During a four-year stint as parliamentary speaker ending a year ago, he pushed through a series of laws that reinforced the militarization of Honduran society and restrictions on access to information.

The prioritization of security prevents many media and other entities from gathering and circulating information of public interest. Migdonia Ayestas, the head of a violence-monitoring unit at the National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH), criticizes the police for preventing the media from publishing the information she gathers every day about violence, including violence in remote areas.

Her unit was also recently forced to stop publishing its nine-year-old monthly report on violence in Honduras because the interior ministry refused to share its statistics with her any more.

The public's right to information was also restricted by the [Law on Official Secrets and Classification of Public Information](#) that parliament hastily adopted on 13 January 2014. It stripped the Institute for Public Access to Information (IAIP) of its responsibility for classifying information of public interest, reassigning this responsibility to each ministry and state agency.

The law says: "Any information (...) relating to the internal strategic framework of state agencies and whose revelation, if made publicly available, could produce undesirable institutional effects" may be "restricted."

Tighter government controls on the flow of information have had a direct impact on the work of journalists. Journalists **Marylin Méndez** and **Dagoberto Rodríguez**, the editor of the daily *La Prensa*, said no government minister talks to journalists without permission from the president's office. The government is "[clearly obstructing serious and professional media.](#)" Rodríguez added.

The obstacles for officially recognized journalists are even greater for those who are not recognized. Local radio stations and freelance journalists – who make up the majority of media and reporters in Honduras – are also pressured by means of the selective allocation of advertising. As a result, many limit themselves to providing officially approved and uniform coverage.

"When you're hungry, you obviously take what's going," said a reporter who resorts to the widespread practice of "journalism for hire," under which anyone with enough money can pay a reporter to put out a story that benefits their individual interests.

This situation and the near-monopoly of the leading media companies leave little space for independent and critical news reporting. As a result, the harassment of civil society organizations often also [targets linked community radio stations.](#)

Control of coverage of sensitive subjects such as police corruption, land conflicts and the environmental impact of mining is all the stricter when powerful economic interests are at stake, as in the case of Dinant, a company owned by Honduran businessman [Miguel Facussé Barium](#), who is on the Reporters Without Borders list of "Predators of Press Freedom."

After repeated reports by national and international human rights groups and independent media about Dinant's alleged involvement in the violent deaths of hundreds of peasants in the northern Aguán Valley, an investigation by the Compliance Advisor Ombudsman ordered the freezing of a 15-million-dollar World Bank loan to Dinant.

Reporters Without Borders regrets that this modest achievement has not been supported at the highest government level. The government should try to ensure respect for freedom of information by protecting independent media workers and journalists with the same energy as that recently deployed by President Hernández to denigrate some of his fellow citizens.

During a trip to Washington on 12 June, he said his main goal was to "refute the reports [about human rights violations] that bad Hondurans send in order to sully the country's image."

Honduras is ranked 129th out of 180 countries in the 2014 Reporters Without Borders [press freedom index](#).

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