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Americas - Paraguay

Witch-hunt

Purges in state media, community radios on alert

12 July 2012

Three weeks after President Fernando Lugo was removed from office by parliament on 22 June, Paraguay's state media are gripped by a climate of tension and intimidation, corroborated to Reporters Without Borders by sources both inside and outside the country.

An [apparent truce](#) that followed the visit of José Miguel Insulza, secretary general of the Organization of American States, on 2-3 July did not last. Freedom of news and information is suffering as a result of the pressure on journalists, and others, known for their opposition to parliament's move against Lugo on 22 June.

"Unfortunately, the information provided to us shows there is a clear desire for renewed political control of state media and communications, with the aim of playing down as much as possible the manner in which Lugo was removed from office and its repercussions," Reporters Without Borders said.

"State media worthy of the name must reflect current public opinion. Efforts to sideline journalists seen as embarrassing, as well as the partial censorship of some programmes, are further indications of the thinking of those who were on the winning side on June 22, to the detriment of the pluralist debate that should have taken place. Constitutional guarantees should be respected."

The new rulers have taken aim at new state media outlets set up under Lugo — *TV Pública*, *Radio Nacional* and the news agency *IPParaguay* — which since June 22 have been at the heart of a campaign by citizens against the takeover.

"On 6 July I was asked to go and sign a document ratifying my resignation," a state media employee told us.

Eight journalists and communications workers from the state media or who worked under the former government were officially informed of their dismissal today:

Angelina Agüero Villalba, communications department in the president's office; **Daniela María Candia Abatte**, *Televisión Pública*; **Roque González Benítez**, information and communications secretariat for development; **Fátima Elizabeth Rodríguez González**, also of the information and communications secretariat for development who worked additionally as a producer for *TV Pública* and *Radio Nacional*; **Carlos Hector Troya Palacios**, *IPParaguay*; **Rafael Alejandro Urzua**, photographer in the president's office; **Oswaldo Zayas**, social welfare secretariat; **Tadeo Blanco**, environment secretariat.

The heads of *TV Pública* and *IPParaguay* received similar treatment on 22 June.

Persistent "technical" problems

The tension that is palpable inside the country can also be felt on the airwaves. The weekly *Radio Nacional* programme "Ape ha Pepe" ("Here and There"), in which Paraguayans living abroad take part, was taken off the air on 23 June and returned on 30 June.

On 7 July, the station was the victim of a strange communications breakdown. Gustavo Zaracho of the Paraguayan community in France told us: "At first I tried phoning the station and got no reply. Then I called the number of a newsroom mobile phone. We realised that the switchboard was jammed and they were unable to transfer any external calls. However, communication was restored 10 minutes before the end of the programme. Meanwhile, I told them by mobile phone about the on-air problem.

"A station representative told me in a threatening manner that it was a technical problem. At the time, a police officer who is usually responsible for guarding the building was with him."

Even if these are nothing more than technical hitches, they have recurred frequently since 22 June. Something similar happened to the programmes "Micrófono Abierto" ("Open Mic") on *TV Pública* and "Red Pública" on *Radio Nacional*. The state-run station ZP 12 in the city of Pilar, off the air since 24 June officially because of a power cut, was able to resume broadcasting yesterday after repairs to its equipment.

Apprehension over new law

The tug-of-war between Lugo and parliament was partly over the Telecommunications Law. The law has recently been amended in a manner that could adversely affect the future of community radio stations, many of which are poorly funded and not yet in possession of broadcasting licences.

New clauses in the law introduced and approved by members of parliament provide, in particular, for a ban on advertising on such stations, restrictions on their transmission range and the possibility of legal action against their representatives if they broadcast without a licence. However, these provisions, which were vetoed by Lugo, could now take effect shortly.

The new management at the telecoms watchdog Conatel announced on 8 July that about 200 small radio stations would be decommissioned. Reporters Without Borders notes that the indiscriminate application of such a law based on questionable ideological criteria would infringe the principles of the American Convention on Human Rights, by which Paraguay is bound as a member of the OAS.

Community radios, staunch opponents of the 22 June power grab, are often the targets of hostility from local political chiefs. A journalist with an independent radio station in Asuncion said a current example was *Radio Canindeyu*, which did an important job of informing the public about a clash between protesting peasants and police in the northern city of Curuguaty on 15 June in which 17 people were killed (used by parliament as one of the reasons to remove Lugo 11 days later).

He said they were also frowned on by the union of Paraguayan broadcasters, which was one of the first organizations to rally to the new government of President Federico Franco.
