

RSF's 2018 Index: Mixed performance in Latin America

The 2018 Index shows a slight overall improvement in respect for press freedom in Latin America but this should not divert attention from the continuing problems of violence, impunity, and authoritarian policies towards journalists in many Latin American countries.

With enlightened media legislation and journalists enjoying a relatively high level of freedom, Costa Rica (10th) continues to be Latin America's best ranked country in 2018. It nonetheless fell four places due to the harassment of journalists by the authorities, especially during the presidential campaign that began in late 2017.

Strongmen still in power

At the other end of the spectrum, Cuba (unchanged at 172nd) continues year after year to be the Western Hemisphere's worst ranked country. The Castro family-led regime maintained its monopoly on news and information. Raúl Castro's police and intelligence services silenced dissent and persecuted privately-owned media outlets (which are not permitted by the constitution). Journalists and bloggers are often arrested or opt for self-imposed exile.

Venezuela's six-place fall to 143rd in the 2018 Index was the most significant decline in Latin America. The [authoritarian excesses](#) of President Nicolás Maduro and his government continued to grow in 2017. Independent and opposition media and foreign reporters are [constantly targeted](#) by the Bolivarian police and intelligence services in an attempt to minimize coverage of the grave political and economic crisis that began in early 2016.

Attacks on reporters during protests, arbitrary arrests (often followed by heavy-handed interrogation), destruction of equipment, and deportations of foreign journalists all continued in 2017. [State censorship](#) increased. CONATEL, the telecommunications regulator, stripped many critical TV and radio stations of their broadcast frequencies while opposition print media were badly hit by orchestrated newsprint shortages.

In Bolivia (down four at 110th), cash-strapped media have to fight for survival and the critical ones are harassed by the government that Evo Morales has led since 2006. Its members attack opposition journalists verbally and prosecute them with the aim of reducing them to silence. Their targets have included [Wilson García Mérida](#), charged with sedition, and [Yadira Peláez Imanereico](#), who is accused of "political violence."

Unable to contain spiralling violence and impunity

In Central America and Mexico, violence and impunity maintain a reign of fear and self-censorship. In Salvador (66th), Guatemala (116th), Honduras (141st) and Mexico (147th),

investigative reporters, especially those covering organized crime and corruption, are systematically subjected to threats, intimidation, and physical violence. Those that refuse or are unable to [relocate in the face of imminent danger](#) often pay with their lives. One journalist [was killed](#) in Honduras in 2017 and 11 were killed in Mexico, which became the world's second deadliest country for the media last year, surpassed only by Syria. The murders of two veteran journalists who covered collusion between organized crime and politicians – [Miroslava Breach](#) in Chihuahua state and [Javier Valdez](#) in Sinaloa state – sent shockwaves through both Mexico and the international community.

In these countries corrupted by trafficking in arms and drugs, governments have yet again proved powerless to rein in the violence. Where specific mechanisms for protecting journalists exist, as in Honduras and Mexico, they have proved ineffective in dealing with the appalling security conditions of poorly-paid journalists, especially those working for local, independent media outlets.

Also mired in corruption and violence, Brazil (up one place at 102nd) has again failed to rise above the 100th mark in the Index. In an extremely tense and polarized political environment, highlighted by President Dilma Rousseff's impeachment and removal in 2016, the Brazilian authorities have yet to prioritize press freedom.

Attacks against reporters have fallen slightly but are still very frequent, especially at demonstrations. Journalists are often subjected to intimidation or [abusive judicial proceedings](#) when they try to cover the interests of politicians and elected officials. Their vulnerability is especially noticeable in areas far from the major cities, where independent and community media lack public support and struggle to survive.

Inadequate progress after government change

Ecuador's 13-place rise to 92nd – the Western Hemisphere's biggest this year – is due in part to Lenin Moreno's election as president in May 2017, which has [defused tension](#) between the government and privately-owned media after Rafael Correa's three consecutive terms as president (2007 to 2017). During his decade in office, Correa kept a tight grip on the media agenda and did not hesitate to personally and publicly target critical independent media outlets, leading to repeated conflicts and judicial clashes.

In Argentina (down two at 52nd), the war between government and media that marked the Kirchner years has eased up since Mauricio Macri became president in December 2015. But the situation is still worrying two years later and media outlets deemed overly critical are often the targets of civil defamation suits. Several reporters were targeted and physically attacked by police during major street protests in 2017.

Colombia (down one at 130th) has only [partially](#) fulfilled the hopes raised by the signing of historic peace accords between the government and Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in December 2016. It continues to be one of the Western Hemisphere's most dangerous countries for the media. [Abduction](#) and physical violence are still common. Armed groups such as the ELN combat attempts by alternative or community media to cover their activities, leading to the creation of information "black holes," especially in rural areas.

The presidential elections that are due to be held in 2018 in some of the region's worst ranked countries – Cuba, Venezuela, Mexico, Colombia, and Brazil – could change the dynamic and create space for better relations between governments and journalists.

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