

Americas– Press Freedom Index 2013

Violence, polarization still obstruct reporting in Americas

Deceptive progress, ups and downs in south

Just as the emergence of major protest movements (and ensuing crackdowns) had a big impact on the rankings of certain countries in 2011, so a decline in the protests has logically also had an impact a year later.

Chile, for example, rose 20 places to 60th in the index after the previous year's student protests abated in 2012. Crackdowns were concentrated in the Aysén region, which saw big protests in the first quarter. But Chile's improvement must be put in perspective. Its media landscape is skewed, community broadcast media are criminalized, especially in the Mapuche region, and journalists have run into difficulties when trying to investigate the 1973-90 military dictatorship.

For similar reasons, the United States rose 15 places to 32nd, recovering a ranking more appropriate to the "country of the First Amendment." Its previous year's fall was due to the fact that the crackdown on the Occupy Wall Street movement did not spare reporters in the field. Canada, on the other hand, fell ten positions to 20th, losing its status as the western hemisphere's leader to Jamaica (13th). This was due to obstruction of journalists during the so-called "Maple Spring" student movement and to continuing threats to the confidentiality of journalists' sources and Internet users' personal data, in particular, from the C-30 bill on cyber-crime.

The clearest new trends are to be seen in the south. Brazil fell again, this time 9 places to 108th, after falling 41 places in 2011. Its media landscape is also badly distorted. Heavily dependent on the political authorities at the state level, the regional media are exposed to attacks, physical violence against their personnel, and court censorship orders, which also target the blogosphere. These problems were exacerbated by violence during the campaign for the October 2012 municipal elections.

Media wars and coup precipitate falls

Paraguay fell 11 places to 91th following President Fernando Lugo's June 2012 removal in an "institutional coup d'état," which had an almost immediate impact on the news media. A full-blown purge of employees in state-owned media created by the Lugo administration was accompanied by frequent programme censorship. The few community radio stations with broadcast frequencies were also scared of losing them.

Despite a high level of physical violence against journalists, Peru rose 10 places to 105th, now topping Brazil, itself one place above Bolivia (109th), where several media were the targets of spectacular arson or dynamite attacks and both national and local polarization are having an impact. Ecuador fell 15th places to 119th after a year of extreme tension between the government and leading privately-owned media. This left it below two places below Venezuela, where several media were closed arbitrarily, a journalist was killed and more than 170 cases of violence were reported in a “media war” climate.

Although on a less dramatic scale, polarization is becoming a concern in Argentina, which slipped a few places to 54th amid growing clashes between the government and certain privately-owned media, above all the Clarín group, which is resisting full implementation of the 2009 Ley de Medios, a law regulating the broadcast media. On the other bank of the River Plate, Uruguay continued its climb, this time to 27th position, within 10 places of Costa Rica, still Latin America’s leader at 18th.

There has been little change in the marked contrasts there were seen in Central America in 2011. A lack of pluralism, intermittent tension with the political authorities, harassment and self-censorship are the main reasons for the scant change in Nicaragua (78th), Guatemala (95th) and Panama (111th), where attacks on journalists tripled in the space of a year, local unions said.

On the hand, El Salvador owes its enviable 38th place to government efforts to combat violence crime, even if journalists and media often complain about the lack of access to state-held information. The Dominican Republic rose 15 places to 80th because of a decline in violence against journalists and legal proceedings that threaten freedom of information. But it is still far behind its neighbour Haiti (49th), where the situation is still largely unchanged although some journalists have accused President Michel Martelly of hostility towards them.

Caribbean turmoil, same countries at the bottom

Political tension and judicial harassment account for the ranking of other countries in the Guyanas and Caribbean. Trinidad and Tobago (44th) still has not stopped its illegal monitoring of journalists’ phone calls and attempts to identify their sources, although it promised to stop in 2010. In Surinam (down nine places to 31th), the often stormy relations between President Desi Bouterse and many journalists are unlikely to improve after the passage of an amnesty law for the murders of around 15 government opponents, including five journalists, three decades ago when Bouterse was Surinam’s dictator. He returned to power through the polls in 2010.

The seven-member Organization of East Caribbean States fell eight places to 34th because of often direct pressure from the political authorities on news media and the failure to move ahead with the

decriminalization of defamation. Similar pressure was reported in Guyana (69th), whose ranking continues to suffer from the state's monopoly of radio broadcasting.

In the bottom third, Honduras was 127th because two journalists were killed in direct connection with their work and because the status quo imposed by the June 2009 coup remains unchanged. There has never been any let-up in the persecution of opposition media and community radio stations, or in the criminalization of human rights activists and grass-roots movements that provide information about such sensitive issues as land disputes, police abuses and minority rights.

Although hopes have been raised by the latest negotiations between the government and FARC guerrillas, Colombia (129th) still has its paramilitaries-turned-drug traffickers, who are the enemies of all those involved in the provision of new and information. Another journalist was killed in 2012 although there was a slight decrease in the number of physical attacks.

With six journalists killed, Mexico (153rd) has maintained its status as the hemisphere's most dangerous country for the media. Violence and censorship were particularly noticeable during the controversial July 2012 elections, which restored the presidency to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Cuba, the hemisphere's only country to tolerate no independent media (or with few exceptions), got the region's lowest ranking – 171st. The past year has seen a renewed crackdown on dissent and the island now has two journalists in prison, one of them a state media employee.