

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing

on

Human Rights Challenges in Mexico

Month 06, 2022, 3:00 p.m.

Online

Statement of [PAULA MARIA SAUCEDO RUIZ]
[PROTECTION AND DEFENSE PROGRAM OFFICER]
[ARTICLE 19]

Co-Chair McGovern, Co-Chair Smith, commission members, colleagues from NGOs and everyone who is listening, thank you all for being here, for the invitation and for the opportunity to

share information about Mexico. My name is Paula Saucedo, I am the protection and defense program officer at ARTICLE 19 Mexico.

Throughout the last three years in Mexico, we have witnessed, as never before, the consolidation of a worrying tendency to deny and erase problems related to human rights from public discourse. The denial of reality has both immediate and longer term consequences for the exercise of these rights, particularly that of freedom of expression, because it requires downplaying issues and excising a range of topics from public conversation.

This denial and selective ignorance and absence of the State is reflected in the mechanisms of official (dis)information, public stigmatization, discretionality in the allocation of official advertising, shortcomings in the transparency system, violence against the press, digital divide, absence of mechanisms to guarantee access to information for communities and indigenous peoples, restrictions on Internet rights, a weak and crumbling institutional framework, and the lack of truth in cases of serious human rights violations.

But Today, I will focus on the challenges and the fact that in Mexico the press is under attack. Mexico continues to be the most dangerous country in the Americas to practice journalism, with 2022 the most lethal year: 11 journalists have been killed to date and 29 remain disappeared. And in ARTICLE 19 we document that every 14 hours a journalist or media outlet is attacked in connection to their work.

Including data registered in 2021, during the current term of office of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, there have already been 1,945 attacks against the press, an 85% increase upon the first three years of Enrique Peña Nieto's government. Also, in 2021, ARTICLE 19 registered—for the first time—at least one attack against the press in each state of the country.

Threats and attacks against journalists and media outlets come from a variety of sources: members of organised crime, private individuals and companies, but mostly state actors. Every year, on average 2 out of every 5 attacks against the press can be directly linked to Mexican authorities¹ in the three levels of government: municipal, state and federal level.

¹ In 2021, out of the 644 registered by ARTICLE 19, authorities from the Mexican State are linked to at least 274 attacks (42.55%), compared to 21.31% committed by individuals, followed by political parties (9.18%) and organised crime (6.53%). **That is to say, Mexican authorities are directly linked to 2 out of every 5 attacks against the press.** In the case of political parties, we cannot ignore how they become leading perpetrators of violence during electoral processes such as in 2021. It stands out how in 2019 we documented fewer cases of attacks against the press committed by federal public officials (34) than in the previous presidential period (average 52.3%), but from 2020 and throughout 2021, their participation has increased **reaching the levels of the previous presidential period.**

The violence against the press does not change based on the political party, and this is because in a country like Mexico, so corrupt and so impune, the press constitutes a counterbalance. That is why **the coverage most closely linked to violence against journalists is corruption and politics. For instance, in 2021, out of the 644 attacks, 44.25% of the total (285 attacks) were linked to that coverage, followed by the** coverage of security and justice, known as “red pages” with 155 cases (equivalent to 24% of the total). It is important to highlight that in one year, the attacks against those covering land and territory issues have tripled from eight attacks in 2020 to 24 in 2021. This could have links to the government's economic strategy and mega projects.

The reality that the press suffers on daily bases is also denied by the authorities. Furthermore, the State actively denies the challenges faced by the press while stigmatizing it. As an example, during the weekly presidential morning conferences, there is a segment called Who's Who in the Lies. Every Wednesday, the federal government tries to divide the public opinion by categorizing the press between the good journalists, who wrote favorably of the President, and bad journalists, or those who criticized and dissented. This section is contrary to the values of democracy, restricting the flow of information and misinforming the society.

The stigma discourse has also a chilling effect. On 2021, in at least 46 cases, ARTICLE 19 documented that both private and public actors used the same discourse from the morning conference. We also saw an increase in different types of attacks: smear campaigns (62), stigmatisation by means of official communication (17) and criminalisation (7) compared to other years. Furthermore, we continue to highlight through evidence that judicial harassment is on the rise; last year on average 3 journalists or media outlets were sued every month for exercising the right to inform.

Patterns of systematic oppression are added to the constant harassment against the press: precariousness and discrimination, where low salaries and lack of social security have been possible due to omissions and complicity between media owners and authorities.

Within this context, we have also witnessed a collapse of institutions. For instance, while the budget for the Special Victims Commission was reduced by 3% (about \$25m) from the year previous, the approved budget for the National Guard is 62.8 billion pesos, an increase of 70% (26 billion) compared to 2021. This is the position of a government that prefers loyal militaries over critical victims who demand justice and their rights.

On the other hand, the Protection Mechanism is necessary but insufficient as long as the Mexican state continues attacking the press and denying its role and the responsibility that has to protect all the press. In fact, the shortcomings of protection public policies, alongside poor practices in the procurement and administration of justice, contribute to a national impunity rate of 98.73% for these crimes.

Violence against the press has led to greater concern at the national and international levels due to the alarming pattern of the murder of journalists. Given the recurrent question of “what to do”, strengthening prevention and protection policies by providing technical support to improve the capabilities and resources of the prosecution authorities, keep supporting the initiatives to strengthen the Protection Mechanism, supporting organized civil society led efforts for increased transparency and accountability in crimes against freedom of expression. Finally, remind Mexican authorities that the US Congress could limit support through Leahy Law limitations under section 620M of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, 22 U.S.C. 2378d as to enforce the Mexican authorities to properly investigate cases of torture, enforced disappearances and other human rights violations.