

Americas

Southern Cone joins North America while Central America sinks

The process of adopting a Shield Law protecting the confidentiality of journalists' sources at the federal level is far from over in the United States (20th) but the judicial authorities are no longer jailing journalists and violating civil liberties in the name of national security as they were in the Bush era. So the US is back in the press freedom top 20, as is appropriate for a country where the press has traditionally played its role as independent watchdog well.

The other most striking development is the fall of Honduras (128th), which already had a poor ranking and where the 28 June coup d'état took a heavy toll on press freedom. The new de facto government preys on media that do not support it and has managed to impose a news blackout at the international media's expense.

Elsewhere in Central America, the problem of violent crime is undermining countries such as El Salvador, where gangs known as "maras" were already targeting the press before they murdered documentary filmmaker Christian Poveda (after the period covered by this index). The problem has also taken a disturbing turn for the worse in Guatemala (106th). Tension between the press and President Daniel Ortega's administration explain Nicaragua's fall to 76th position.

The other major decline has been in Venezuela (124th), where a journalist was murdered against a backdrop of rampant criminal violence and President Hugo Chávez's administration kept changing the rules that govern broadcasting with the aim of steadily silencing its critics. The sudden withdrawal of the licences of 34 regional radio and TV stations in August was part of the strategy.

Already badly placed in the 2008 index, Venezuela is now among the region's worst press freedom offenders, close to Colombia (126th) and Mexico (tied 137th). In both these countries, the security forces are partly, and in no small measure, to blame for the prevailing violence that leads to self-censorship and subjects being placed off-limits. In a state of virtual civil war since the launch of a major federal offensive against drug trafficking in 2006, Mexico has maintained its tragic status as the hemisphere's most dangerous country for journalists, with 55 killed since 2000 (and nine since January of this year).

Only Cuba (170th), the region's unchanging dictatorship, where press freedom is non-existent, is ranked lower in the index. The meagre hopes raised by Raúl Castro's accession to the presidency in February 2008 quickly evaporated. Two more imprisonments, bringing the number of detained journalists to 25, the frequent blocking of websites and arrests of bloggers are all evidence of the lack of any evolution in the situation of human rights and freedoms.

One of Cuba's Caribbean neighbours, the Dominican Republic (98th), slipped a few more places because of a high level of violence and an increase in abusive lawsuits against news media. An increase in physical attacks on journalists, combined with lawsuits, administrative censorship and a journalist's imprisonment, were the reasons for Ecuador's fall to 84th position.

Bolivia (95th) moved in the opposition direction after plummeting last year. The “media war” is not yet completely over but the government gradually resumed a dialogue with a sector of the press that was partly to blame for the previous year’s political crisis, especially in provinces controlled by opposition parties that want autonomy. Long the holder of the record for physical attacks on journalists, Peru (85th) rose in the index despite the government’s recent closure of a radio station.

Traditionally marred by violence and a lack of any kind of security for journalists, Paraguay (54th) and Haiti (tied 57th) have both climbed the rankings. Violence towards the media has receded in both countries and journalists are daring to tackle sensitive subjects with greater frequency. Guyana (tied 39th) has soared, overtaking Surinam (42nd), thanks to less legalistic quibbling on the part of the authorities and an end to a government policy of withholding state advertising from certain media. The government still has a radio monopoly, however.

A tradition of media diversity, an increase in media democracy and in some cases a decrease in abuse of authority and other censorship attempts are the reasons for the very good rankings obtained by Argentina (47th) and Uruguay (29th), which are on a par with many European countries. Uruguay has even overtaken Costa Rica (30th) as the Latin American country with the highest ranking, staying ahead of Chile (tied 39th) and now close behind Jamaica (23rd) and Trinidad and Tobago (28th), where the press continues to be a respected institution.

Brazil (71st), the regional power, finally rid itself in May of a press law it inherited from the military dictatorship, and has benefitted from the government’s efforts to improve access to information. Despite these positive changes, the government has yet to put an end to the persistent violence against the media in the big cities and in the north and northeast. Preventive censorship continues in certain states where the authorities monopolise the local media.

One of the countries where prosecutions led to exorbitant damages awards, Canada (19th) fell a few places but still holds the hemisphere’s highest position.