



RSF 2020 Index: Latin America's dark horizon for press freedom

The environment for journalists in Latin America is increasingly complex and hostile. Many journalists covering sensitive subjects have experienced an increase in harassment, violence and intimidation. At the same time, the media have been subjected to major smear campaigns in most of the region's countries.

Aside from two notable exceptions – Costa Rica, now ranked 7th in the Index after rising three places, and Uruguay, which has held on to its 19th place – the 2020 Index is characterized by an overall decline in respect for press freedom in Latin America. Harassment and stigmatization of the media, fed by online disinformation and attacks, have increased in scope, especially in countries with major social conflicts.

Hostility fuelled by political and social instability

This is the case in Haiti (83rd), which has suffered a 21-place fall, the biggest in the 2020 Index. For nearly two years there have been major, often violent protests against President Jovenel Moïse, who is accused of corruption, and journalists have often been targeted during the protests. Journalist Néhémie Joseph's murder in 2019 testified to a disturbing spiral of violence and to Haitian journalism's extreme vulnerability.

As in Haiti, social conflicts and the need to cover demonstrations have put journalists on the front line in many of the region's countries. This has been the case in Ecuador (down 1 at 98th), where protests by the part of the population that feels betrayed by President Lenín Moreno's adoption of neoliberal policies have been accompanied by attacks on journalists that have often made it impossible for them to work. So too in Chile (51st) – which has fallen another five places after the previous year's eight-place fall – where violent protests triggered by a hike in Santiago metro fares led to a wave of aggression and targeted attacks against journalists and media outlets throughout the country.

Bolivia (down 1 at 114th) also saw many cases of harassment and attacks on journalists during demonstrations throughout the election campaign and presidential election in November 2019 that resulted in President Evo Morales resigning and being forced into exile, plunging the country into a period of uncertainty and instability.

Even if it continues to be one of the region's better behaved countries, Argentina (64th) has fallen seven places in the 2020 Index above all because of police violence and attacks on journalists during demonstrations in the biggest cities and during the election that brought Alberto Fernández to the presidency in December 2019.

Authoritarian excesses and multiform censorship

In Brazil (down 2 at 107th), the effects of Jair Bolsonaro's installation as president in January 2019 is the chief reason why the country has fallen two places in RSF's Index for the second

year running. And it will probably continue to fall as long as Bolsonaro, egged on by his family and several members of his government, continues to insult and humiliate some of Brazil's leading journalists and media outlets, feeding a climate of hate and mistrust towards news providers. Journalists, especially women journalists, are increasingly vulnerable in this fraught environment and are constantly attacked by hate groups and Bolsonaro supporters, especially on social media.

In Venezuela (147th), which owns its one-place rise in the Index solely to other countries falling, President Maduro's authoritarianism continues to grow and his government's constant persecution of the independent press takes many forms, including arbitrary arrests, violence by police and intelligence officers, depriving critical radio and TV stations of broadcast frequencies, Internet cuts and blocking of social media, and expulsions for foreign journalists.

The independent press in Nicaragua (down 3 at 117th) has suffered the same fate and is succumbing to persecution by President Daniel Ortega – who was reelected for a third consecutive term in 2016 – by his government and by his supporters. Cases of journalists being arbitrarily detained or fleeing the country increased in 2019. Because of a government-orchestrated shortage of the necessary inputs (including newsprint and rubber), printed newspapers have virtually disappeared.

By falling two places, Cuba (171st) has reentered the Index's bottom ten and continues to be Latin America's worst ranked country. Now headed by Miguel Díaz-Canel, the Cuban regime maintains its near-total monopoly of news and information, and the constitution continues to ban privately-owned media. Arrests and imprisonment of troublesome journalists increased in 2019.

Intractable structural problems

With at least ten journalists murdered in connection with their work in 2019, Mexico (up 1 at 143rd) continues to be Latin America's most dangerous country for the media, and President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's government has proved unable to rein in the spiral of violence and impunity. As in its Central American neighbours, the collusion between organized crime and corrupt politicians and officials – especially at the local level – puts news providers in great danger. In Guatemala (116th) and Honduras (down 2 at 148th), in particular, journalists with the opposition and community media outlets who dare to denounce political corruption are often attacked, threatened, forced to flee the country, or murdered.

The problems are proving equally intractable in Colombia (130th), which has fallen one place in the Index, and is back to where it was in 2018. The increase in attacks, death threats and abductions targeting journalists since Iván Duque's installation as president in August 2018 has turned various parts of the country into black holes from which absolutely no news and information emerges and has undermined journalism even further.

Pressure reinforced by cyber-harassment

In Latin America, as in many other parts of the world, physical attacks against journalists are usually accompanied by cyber-harassment campaigns waged by troll armies or the supporters of authoritarian regimes, or both. These methods of online censorship are growing dangerously and target women journalists in particular.

The panorama is far from promising and, in fact, lasting and significant progress for press freedom faces countless challenges in Latin America. If journalists and media outlets cannot

count on strong and democratic institutions to guarantee their safety and survival, they will have to reinvent themselves and find alternative and innovative solutions.