

Guest Column: Attacks on Press Freedom Are an Attack on Democracy

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Alfonso Esquivel. Antonio de la Cruz. Armando Lopez. Fredid Roman. Heber Vasquez. Jose Arenas. Juan Lopez. Juan Muniz. Luis Ramirez. Maria Lopez. Roberto Barrera. Sheila Oliveira. Yessenia Falconi.

Remember those names. They are the 13 journalists killed this year in Mexico, a country that the Committee to Protect Journalists says has turned into the most dangerous country for journalists.

Mexico's drug cartels pose a particular obstacle to independent journalism. Physical threats are a reality for some journalists, while the cartels' presence in Mexico's northern states and along the Pacific Coast can lead to journalists censoring themselves.

Unfortunately, Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador has not firmly upheld the importance of a free press in a democracy. After the slaying this year of a Mexican journalist, the Inter American Press Association called upon the leader to curtail his harangues against journalists who criticize his administration.

Mexico is far from the only country in the Americas where journalists face personal and professional barriers. Nicaragua. El Salvador. Honduras. Guatemala. Venezuela. They are among the nations that CPJ

considers serious abusers of independent journalism. So does Freedom House, which gives those five countries a score of two or lower on its four-point 2022 ratings for media freedom.

For example, longstanding dictator Daniel Ortega suspended 17 radio and TV stations in Nicaraguain September. Two months earlier, his government raided the homes of a reporter and a photojournalist working for La Prensa newspaper. The government also detained two drivers working for the independent operation.

The list continues. In June, authorities canceled the legal status of the independent Trinchera de la Noticia. In March, a judge found the publisher of La Prensa guilty of money laundering after a closed-door trial. In February, another journalist received nine years for conspiring to undermine Nicaragua's integrity and distributing false information.

These are only some of the attempts to control a free press in Latin America. Increasingly, journalists and media organizations find their ability to provide reliable reporting and in-depth investigations restricted in some countries. The limits are part of a larger unraveling of democracy across Latin America.

The question is, what to do about these challenges?

Most important, Latin American civil society leaders who value a free press should embrace efforts to bolster independent reporting. Fortunately, some efforts exist.

During this summer's Summit of the Americas, the Organization of American States helped launch the Center for Media Integrity of the Americas. The center, which plans on becoming an independent entity, seeks to fight back against pressures on journalists, including from governments, drug cartels and corporate interests.

In September, the center hosted a conference featuring Venezuelan, Cuban and Nicaraguan journalists. The reporters told their stories, explained how attacks on freedom of the press are linked to declines in democracy, and advocated for the cause of independent journalism in the Americas.

The region also needs trained journalists. Here, too, numerous efforts exist.

The Consortium to Support Independent Journalism in Latin America invests in journalists doing investigative reporting in Latin America. University of Texas-Austin's Knight Center equips future reporters to work in the region. And the Center for Media Integrity of the Americas will host a competition to award Latin American journalists money to pursue their reporting projects.

Training journalists requires money, of course. Private philanthropy, especially, can help provide necessary resources. Government assistance for getting a vibrant press off the ground in democratically challenged nations can only go so far before it looks like governments are spinning stories.

The United States cannot fix this problem alone, but our voice matters. The Biden administration rightly acknowledged this spring the need for journalistic freedom. The United States needs to continue promoting this idea, and not just on anniversaries like World Press Freedom Day.

The larger reason democrats around the world should stand against the undermining of a free flow of information relates to what Rosental Alves, director of the University of Texas at Austin's Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas, says: "When you kill a journalist, you also are killing an idea: the right to gather and distribute information."

We live in a time when disinformation abounds, often through social media or big microphones. Citizens, especially where democracy is in retreat, need access to reliable sources of information and news, the kind that a vibrant free press provides. Without such, democracy cannot take root, much less thrive.

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