

Silencing criticism in Mexico

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Journalists and human rights defenders in Mexico are being attacked in an attempt to silence their criticism. Many are forced to flee or risk being assassinated. The consequences are both personal and of wider social significance.

In the context of the widespread violence associated with organised crime in Mexico, human rights defenders and journalists often become specific targets. Since the year 2000, at least 125 journalists have been killed in Mexico and another 21 have gone missing. Meanwhile, from December 2012 to July 2017 at least 106 human rights defenders have been killed and 81 disappeared.¹ And, although data is hard to obtain, 276 attacks against the press have been reported in 2017, 23% more than in 2016.²

Denouncing human rights violations, publicising the corruption of local authorities or simply providing information on what is happening in certain areas of the country are sufficient grounds for individuals to

be threatened, assaulted, assassinated or disappeared. With the authorities unwilling or unable to crack down on criminal gangs and turning a blind eye to aggressions committed by government officials, it falls to journalists and human rights defenders to expose murders, disappearances or other criminal acts. To prevent them from doing this, criminal groups force some journalists to collaborate with them or face being victims of aggression themselves. In popular parlance, the offer is 'silver or lead'.

This context is often aggravated by the open hostility of different authorities towards journalists and human rights defenders, which reduces or eliminates the possibility of seeking protection or

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support. In addition, impunity is almost absolute. There were only three convictions for attacks on journalists between 2010 and 2016 – just 0.15% of all cases investigated by the Office of the Special Prosecutor for Crimes against Freedom of Expression.

The displacement of defenders and journalists

Many journalists and human rights defenders opt for silence, abandoning their human rights work, while others – when the risk becomes unbearable – are forced to move to other parts of the country or to other countries. For those who decide to seek refuge in other countries, however, there are additional barriers to protection. Journalist Martín Méndez Pineda, for example, travelled to El Paso, Texas, and applied for asylum in the United States but after spending four months in a detention centre – which he described as “hell” – during which he was twice denied release on parole, he decided to return to Mexico even though he was aware of the danger to which he was returning.

Sometimes the authorities themselves use relocation as a way to offer protection to an individual at risk. The Mechanism for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Journalists, created in 2012 by the Mexican government and which is currently protecting 538 people (342 human rights defenders and 196 journalists), includes among the protection measures available to it the temporary relocation of the person who has been threatened or attacked.³ Although relocation may in certain cases be an urgent measure in order to provide security, it should not be forgotten, however, that this is only being offered because of the government’s inability to ensure not only the right to reside where one wants but the right to freedom of expression – and the right of (and need for) society to be kept informed, as well as the right to defend human rights.

Consequences of displacement

The impacts of displacement on journalists and human rights defenders are multiple. For example, the experience of being uprooted and the loss of social relations – a common

phenomenon in cases of forced displacement – is particularly pronounced for journalists and defenders as they often flee alone, leaving their family behind. Uncertainty about their possible return makes integration in their new location particularly difficult. And they often feel guilt about putting their families at risk or creating economic difficulties for them.

There are also wider social implications of the silencing or displacement of journalists and human rights defenders. Many of the states in Mexico where recent attacks have occurred experience serious problems with violence, the presence of organised criminal groups (including cases of collusion between criminal groups and authorities), forced disappearances, internal displacement, land dispossession and other human rights violations. Journalists and human rights defenders attacked in recent months had spoken out and reported on many of these issues. Moreover, these states have a history of violence against journalists and human rights defenders (which has not been investigated or punished). Even in such hostile and dangerous contexts, journalists and defenders carry out important work to document, denounce and bring to light news and events of relevance to the safeguarding of Mexico’s population, the prevention of other human rights violations, including displacement, and the protection of rights.⁴

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1. Red Nacional de Organismos Civiles de Derechos Humanos “Todos los Derechos para Todas y Todos” (Red TDT) (2017) *La Esperanza no se agota* <http://bit.ly/RedTDT-Esperanza-2017>

2. Article 19 (2017) *Primer semestre de 2017: 1.5 agresiones diarias contra periodistas en México*. <https://articulo19.org/informesemestral2017/>

3. Espacio OSC (2015) *Segundo diagnóstico sobre la implementación del Mecanismo de Protección para Personas Defensoras de Derechos Humanos y Periodistas* <http://bit.ly/EspaceOSC-2015>

4. See WOLA ‘Statement on Violence against Journalists and Human Rights Defenders in Mexico’, 7th September 2017 <http://bit.ly/WOLA-07092017>