Silencing criticism in Mexico

Ximena Suárez and Daniel Zapico

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...

---

Access to justice and due process

The Law on Refugees, Complementary Protection and Political Asylum establishes standards of protection and procedures that are clear and adequate. In practice, however, there are administrative and operational barriers that undermine the protection guaranteed by law and the implementation of the right to fair and efficient proceedings – such as, for example, through limiting access to legal assistance for those individuals detained in immigration detention centres. Such barriers obstruct and limit the right to protection as a refugee, which in turn can call into question a State’s commitment to providing effective protection for refugees.

In addition to addressing the shortcomings that currently obstruct recognition of refugee status, Mexico must also introduce effective mechanisms of inter-institutional coordination with the National Institute of Migration to facilitate the process of regularisation once people are recognised as refugees. And, finally, Mexico will need to establish comprehensive programmes to ensure that all members of the refugee population have access to rights such as health and education and to promote their social and economic integration.

Andrea Villasenor
subdireccionesjrmex@sjrlac.org
Project Director, Jesuit Refugee Service Mexico
http://en.jrs.net

Elba Coria elba.coria@ibero.mx
Director, Alaida Foppa Legal Clinic, Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico
http://ibero.mx/derecho @AfClinica

1. UNHCR Fact Sheet. February 2017

2. Also now referred to as Northern Central America.

3. Source: Ministry of the Interior - Migration Policy Unit
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

Ximena Suárez xsuarez@wola.org
Associate for Mexico, Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) www.wola.org

Daniel Zapico dzapico@ohchr.org
Human rights lawyer, currently with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Mexico www.hchr.org.mx