

## In Intimidation War Against Press Brazilian Church Loses 58 Court Cases

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Every lawsuit that has been brought by members of the Universal Church (Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus, an evangelical denomination founded by Brazilian pastor Edir Macedo) against journalist Elvira Lobato, who works for the daily Folha de S. Paulo newspaper, has thus far been won by the journalist.

Winner of the 2008 Esso Journalism Award, the most important prize given to Brazilian news people, the reporter was targeted with a series of legal complaints for her report, "The Universal completes thirty years as a business empire." The number of complaints filed against her was previously unheard of in the history of the Brazilian press.

Of a total of 105 lawsuits filed against the newspaper and Lobato, the decision in 58 cases has come out in favor of the newspaper and journalist. Decisions on the remaining 47 lawsuits are still pending.

"Some of these lawsuits were not only dismissed as inadmissible by the judges, but were also characterized as having been filed in bad faith, cases in which the court decided that the Church was liable to be fined in favor of the newspaper," Orinaldo Molina, the head of the newspaper's juridical counsel, said.

When receiving the journalism award, Lobato said in her acceptance speech that she understood that her selection for the award was related to the lawsuits. In an interview with ABRAJI, the Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism, Lobato said she has been following the growth of the Universal Church's assets over the last thirteen years, as well as the assets of some people connected to the church.

In her opinion, the lawsuits were part of a concerted effort aimed at intimidating her so that she would be stopped from speaking out publicly. "Taken together, the lawsuits represented a huge financial cost for Folha de S. Paulo and an equal emotional cost for me," Lobato said.

The 105 lawsuits were filed in several Brazilian states, in cities that are far away from one another and often with arraignments set for the same day. The states where the lawsuits were filed are: Bahia, Maranhão, Mato Grosso, Rio Grande do Norte, Paraíba, Tocantins, Paraná, Amazonas, Acre, Roraima, Goiás, Ceará, Pará, Pernambuco, Alagoas, São Paulo, Minas Gerais, Rio de Janeiro, Piauí, Espírito Santo, Santa Catarina, Mato Grosso do Sul and Rio Grande do Sul.

The process was further complicated by the fact that some of the legal complaints were filed in several cities within a state. In the state of Amazonas, for instance, the legal procedures are being carried out in the cities of Maués, Coari, Tefé and Manicoré. "Many of these places can only be reached by boat," Molina said.

Lobato attended many of the court proceedings to which she was subpoenaed, but it was impossible for her to attend all of them. However, a newspaper representative was present at all of them.

When the legal complaints started to pile up, ABRAJI published a note condemning the intimidation strategy. "All of these legal processes constitute a joint action and, beyond their immediate goal of intimidating news people, they show that the church has a broader, more long-lasting and deleterious, objective."