

Brazil Is No North Korea, But Its Press Freedom Has Been Declining

Contributed by Meredith Buel
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Military coups, oppressive governments, and the outright murder of journalists are some of the reasons why media freedom continued a global decline in 2006. Those are among the findings of a new report released by Freedom House, a Washington-based, pro-democracy organization.

The annual study of press freedom identifies what it calls troubling trends around the world, especially in Asia, the former Soviet Union and Latin America.

The report says among the most critical setbacks in Asia came in countries such as Thailand, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, the Philippines and Fiji because of political upheaval or states of emergency.

In Latin America, the study identified Venezuela, Argentina and Brazil as countries where media freedoms declined because of state action and deteriorating security environments.

The study says that Argentina misused official advertising while Bolivia and Peru saw an increase in political turbulence and polarization. As for Brazil, there was increased violence with murders and death threats against journalists covering issues related to drug trafficking, organized crime and corruption.

Freedom House's Executive Director is Jennifer Windsor. "The reasons are multiple, but they include what we call the push back against democracy, which is a growing drive to neutralize and eliminate all potential sources of political opposition which has materialized in a number of crucial countries, with the press as a principal target," she said.

The Freedom House report was released during a conference sponsored by the organization and the Broadcasting Board of Governors, which oversees U.S. government, non-military, international broadcasting, including Voice of America.

Under Secretary of State Karen Hughes quoted statistics showing a record number, more than 110 journalists and media workers, were killed last year.

"Journalists expose corruption and crime. They shine a spotlight on human rights abuses around the world and perhaps for those very reasons we are living in a time of great danger for journalists around the world. They are at greater risk than ever of being threatened, jailed or killed,"

The Freedom House report called the decline in press freedom in Russia and Venezuela appalling, because of the impact these nations have on the regions around them.

Washington Post White House reporter and former Moscow Bureau Chief Peter Baker highlighted the killing last year of investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya as evidence of an increasingly dangerous work environment for reporters in Russia.

"It is a climate in which independent journalists find it increasingly difficult to do their craft, to find venues in which to get opposition voices out and even to live their lives as the murder of Anna Politkovskaya last fall showed," he said.

In Venezuela, the government of President Hugo Chavez has announced the pro-opposition network, Radio Caracas Television, will go off the air later this month.

The chairman of the network, Marcel Granier, says the government is becoming more arbitrary and authoritarian. "This has slowly evolved into systematic language of hatred and aggression towards journalists, humorists, editors, newspapers, radio stations, employers and employees of the media," he said.

In Zimbabwe, the Freedom House report says President Robert Mugabe's government continues to tighten control over domestic media and block efforts of foreign reporters to cover events inside the country.

Geoffrey Nyarota, an award-winning investigative journalist from Zimbabwe, says the government-controlled media frequently focuses attacks on independent reporters. "We were described as enemies of the state and there is nothing as disconcerting as to see a government minister describing you as an enemy of the state," he said.

The Freedom House report also warns of expanded restrictions on the Internet, saying China, Vietnam and Iran continue to convict and imprison large numbers of journalists and what it called "cyber dissidents."

The five countries receiving the worst ratings in the survey are Burma, Cuba, Libya, North Korea and Turkmenistan.

Brazil's Report Card

Status: Partly Free

Legal Environment: 15

Political Environment: 16

Economic Environment: 11

Total Score: 42

Freedom of speech and of the press is protected by the 1988 Constitution and Brazil has a diverse and vigorous media system. Nevertheless, press freedom was affected by negative developments in 2006.

In the legal front, lower courts and electoral tribunals have issued rulings that continued to criminalize defamation. In terms of social and political environments, the intensification of criminal activities by drug trafficking gangs has imposed a number of important constraints to the press.

Articles 5 and 220 of the Constitution guarantee freedom from "restriction" of thought, process or medium; however, journalists faced some difficulties when reporting on the general elections of October 2006.

Although the elections were free and fair, they were marked by several political scandals involving President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's administration and his political party, Workers' Party or Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT).

For example, two weeks before the election, the Federal Police detained two PT members with about 790,000 dollars. According to investigations, the money was going to be used to purchase a "dossier" with photographs and videos that linked two leaders of the main opposition party, Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB) to a corruption scheme.

On October 31 three reporters of the country's leading weekly news magazine, *Veja*, were threatened by Federal Police officers while giving a deposition about the dossier scandal. Later, it was revealed that one of the telephones of the leading newspaper, *Folha de S. Paulo*, in the press committee of the Chamber of Deputies was tapped during Federal Police investigation of the same scandal.

Although the judiciary had authorized the tapping, the contacts of the reporters were exposed, violating individual privacy rights, as well as the right of journalists to protect the anonymity of their sources. Also on October 31, *Correio do Estado*

editor Fausto Brites was found guilty of defamation and sentenced to 10 months in prison and fined approximately US\$ 875.

Civil and electoral judges have also limited the ability of journalists to report on the activities of politicians and candidates. On May 8, the Civil Court of Campo Grande granted an injunction to a candidate for the governorship of the Mato Grosso do Sul state against the newspaper *Correio do Estado*.

On May 17, the regional electoral court in the northern state of Amapá ordered the weekly *Folha do Amapá* to remove its May 12 online edition, following a petition by the party of the state's governor. The two cases involved the reporting of irregularities by public officials or candidates.

The rise of criminal organizations and the general intensification of violence have affected the news media. In May, the criminal gang First Capital Command (PCC) organized a wave of attacks in the state of São Paulo, which included prison rebellions, bank robberies, and attacks on police stations and government buildings. According to some sources, more than 400 people died in the conflicts.

On May 18, three heavily armed men invaded the daily *Imprensa Livre* in São Sebastião, in the state of São Paulo. The assailants set the building on fire and hit five employees, telling them to stop reporting on the PCC.

A few months later, on August 12, reporter Guilherme Portanova and technician Alexandre Calado, both from the country's main television network, TV Globo, were abducted in São Paulo by PCC members. Calado was freed the next day with a recorded message demanding improved conditions for prisoners in Brazilian jails.

The kidnappers announced they would kill Portanova if TV Globo did not broadcast the three-minute tape. The journalist was freed only after the network ran the criminals' message.

Among other cases of attacks on the press, Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF, Reporters Without Borders) reported the assassination of journalist Ajuricaba Monassa de Paula in the city of Guapirimirim (Rio de Janeiro state) on July 24. According to RSF, he was beaten to death by town councilor Osvaldo Vivas after reporting on financial irregularities in the local government.

As South America's largest media market, Brazil boasts dynamic and diverse media able to provide a lively array of views, including investigative reporting published through privately owned newspapers, magazines, and online periodicals.

However, despite the pluralism of Brazil's media, ownership is highly concentrated, particularly within the broadcast sector. Globo Organizations, a large media conglomerate, continues to enjoy a dominant position, maintaining ownership of Brazil's primary television network, radio stations, print media, and cable television distribution. Several new

community radio stations requested broadcast licenses during the year.

There are no restrictions to the Internet, which is accessible in 17% of the population; Brazil has the largest number of Internet users in South America.

VoA, Bzz