Ecuador

Country: Ecuador
Year: 2017
Press Freedom Status: Not Free
PFS Score: 66
Legal Environment: 23
Political Environment: 27
Economic Environment: 16

Key Developments in 2016:

• Ecuador’s media regulator, the Superintendence of Information and Communication (SUPERCOM), continued to aggressively enforce the broadly worded 2013 Communications Law. According to Fundamedios, a free expression group, 168 cases involving alleged violations of the law were filed against the media in 2016.
• Public television and radio outlets provided robust coverage of the presidential campaign launch event of ruling party candidate Lenín Moreno, but failed to offer similar coverage for other candidates.
• Several news websites experienced cyberattacks apparently intended to prevent the publication of a report on corruption at the state oil company.
• President Rafael Correa continued to verbally attack critical media outlets.

Executive Summary

Ecuador retains a relatively vibrant media scene despite severe pressure against journalists, who risk prosecution under various laws and overt hostility from government figures, including President Correa. Self-censorship is becoming more pervasive as journalists seek to avoid prosecution and extralegal harassment.
In 2016, SUPERCOM continued to aggressively enforce the 2013 Communication Law, which created powerful media and telecommunications regulators and imposed a range of vaguely worded content restrictions. According to Fundamedios, 168 cases of alleged violations of the law were opened in 2016, and many such cases appeared politically motivated. In August, journalist Janet Hinostroza was accused of “media lynching,” an offense defined by the Communication Law as the repeated dissemination of information intended to harm a person’s reputation or credibility, over a series of investigative reports on corruption in the government’s acquisition of medical supplies.

Journalists faced prosecution under various other laws in connection with their work during the year. In November, authorities issued an arrest warrant for Fernando Villavicencio on charges of publicizing private communications between Correa and the country’s attorney general, in connection with a 2013 article on a legal dispute between the government and Chevron, a U.S. energy corporation. He faces three years’ imprisonment if convicted. Villavicencio has faced prosecution over his work in the past, including on allegations of defaming Correa. Also in 2016, a number of online news portals as well as Fundamedios were blocked by the National Secretariat of Communication (SECOM) over claims they had violated copyright laws. The alleged violations were often connected to pictures of Correa the outlets had published.

In October, public television and radio outlets provided live coverage of a campaign launch event for Moreno, the presidential candidate of Correa’s ruling Alianza PAIS party, at which Correa had given an address. Public outlets failed to offer similar coverage for other candidates. Meanwhile, Correa continued to harass critical journalists and outlets. In April, the president used his Twitter account to attack journalists and outlets that reported on the Panama Papers, a trove of leaked legal documents that revealed potentially corrupt business activities by powerful individuals around the world, including in Ecuador. In September, President Correa called the El Universo newspaper “perverse” and “corrupt,” and claimed it was running a media campaign against the government.

Fundamedios documented 44 incidents of verbal attacks and 34 physical attacks against journalists during 2016. Among them was the beating in March of journalist Jean Cano, who was attacked by participants of an antigovernment protest who had erroneously identified him as a “government infiltrator.” Separately, in May, the Focus Ecuador website was brought down by a cyberattack, just as its staff was about to publish a report on corruption at the state oil company. The Plan V and Mil Hojas websites were also taken down in similar cyberattacks after they published the corruption report from Focus Ecuador.

**Explanatory Note**

This country report has been abridged for Freedom of the Press 2017. For background information on press freedom in Ecuador, see Freedom of the Press 2016.

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