

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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Honduras

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Freedoms of speech and of the press are constitutionally protected in Honduras, but the killing and intimidation of journalists continued to limit press freedom in practice during 2011. The ongoing lack of accountability since the 2009 coup has had a negative effect on freedom of expression. Honduras Human Rights Commissioner Ramón Custodio has failed to provide for serious investigations in a number of cases of murdered journalists, and despite President Porfirio Lobo's expressed determination to bring perpetrators of such crimes to justice, little had been done by year's end. Given this culture of impunity, many journalists fear that the killings are carried out on the orders of, or with the concealed approval of, the police, the military, and other governmental authorities.

Despite the 2005 abolition of the penal code's *desacato* (disrespect) provision, which was aimed at protecting the honor of public officials, restrictive press laws are still used to subpoena and punish journalists who report on sensitive issues such as government corruption, drug trafficking, and human rights abuses. Lack of access to public information is a major problem. In July 2011, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission delivered its report on the 2009 military-led overthrow of former president Manuel Zelaya. It found that the military committed major violations of freedom of expression.

Self-censorship among journalists has been exacerbated by an increase in threats, and a number of journalists were dismissed due to their reporting during 2011. In July, reporter Lenis Fajardo was fired from the Tegucigalpa-based station Radio Globo after a story she investigated led to the loss of the station's advertising contract with a government agency. In August and November, journalists Claudia Mendoza and Eleana Borjas were dismissed from their positions at the online magazine *Revistazo.com*. The women had previously practiced objective reporting on sensitive issues, but the magazine allegedly succumbed to political pressure and refrained from covering topics such as labor and human rights violations.

Harassment, detention, and violent attacks against journalists increased in 2011, especially when journalists covered protests or reported on sensitive issues. In March, police launched a tear gas canister at the vehicle of Radio Globo director David Romero and Canal 36 television reporter Lidieth Díaz as they were interviewing protesters. Also in March, police temporarily detained Pedro López of Radio Progreso as he was covering a separate protest. Manuel Acosta Medina, general manager of the newspaper *La Tribuna*, survived an assassination attempt in May. In December, gunmen fired on the offices of *La Tribuna*, seriously wounding a security guard. The daily had published a statement saying its staff had faced attempted shootings, threats, and harassment in response to critical reporting.

While fewer journalists were murdered in 2011 than in previous years, the increase in intimidation and harassment still made Honduras one of the world's most dangerous countries for journalists. In many instances, gangs targeted journalists who reported on their organized crime activity. However, due to the

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PRESS STATUS

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PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

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LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

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POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

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ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

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government's negligence in investigating these attacks, it is often difficult to identify the culprits. In May, Héctor Francisco Medina Polanco, manager and news anchor of the Omega Visión station, was shot and killed after leaving work in Morazán. He had reported on alleged acts of corruption by local authorities. Also in May, Channel 24 owner Luis Mendoza Cerrato was murdered by three heavily armed men as he arrived at his station in Danlí. In December, two men on a motorcycle murdered radio host Luz Marina Paz and a driver in Tegucigalpa as they headed to her radio station, Cadena Hondureña de Noticias. Paz had a reputation for investigative journalism and criticism of the 2009 coup.

Honduras has nine daily newspapers, six private television stations, and five radio stations that broadcast nationally. Community radio stations are not clearly recognized by law, meaning they operate under threat of closure. Although the independent media sector is active and can report without government restriction, most outlets are owned by a small group of business magnates who have political and commercial interests and exercise considerable control over content. Corruption among journalists and government manipulation of state advertising purchases remain common. According to a 2008 report by the Open Society Institute, journalists often entered into contracts with government officials and received payments in return for favorable reporting.

Around 16 percent of the population had access to the internet in 2011, but poor infrastructure in rural areas limits accessibility. No restrictions on the internet were reported during the year.

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