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Freedom Of The Press - Honduras (2011)

Status: Not Free
Legal Environment: 16
Political Environment: 30
Economic Environment: 15
Total Score: 61

Status change explanation: Honduras declined from Partly Free to Not Free because of a marked increase in harassment and attacks on journalists since the inauguration of President Lobo in January 2010, and an environment of impunity for murderers of media workers.

Freedom of speech and of the press are constitutionally protected in Honduras, but press freedom continued to deteriorate in 2010 with an increase in the number of journalists killed, harassed, or intimidated since the inauguration of President Porfirio Lobo in January. There continues to be a lack of accountability in Honduras since the 2009 coup, which has a negative effect on freedom of speech and of expression. 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.

In August 2010, the government repealed a 2009 decree that had authorized the National Council on Telecommunications to cancel broadcasting licenses that promoted national hate and anarchy, or disrupted peace. Despite this positive development, censorship remains a major issue in Honduras. In the days immediately following the 2009 coup, programming on several broadcasting stations was suspended because of the military occupation. In September, a case against the de facto head of the National Telecommunications Commission regarding the September 2009 closure of Channel 36 and Radio Globo was dismissed, frequent media outlet closures remain an issue. Additionally, journalists who supported the ousted leftist president, Manuel Zelaya, were prosecuted and fired after the coup. Many news outlets that are harassed or shut down turn to the internet to continue providing news. Self-censorship is also an issue among journalists, and the increasing threats toward journalists magnified this trend in 2010. Several press freedom advocacy groups have said journalists felt they could be targets if they were seen as opponents of the government or powerful business figures. In August 2010, the power lines to the transmitters at Radio Uno, a station in San Pedro Sula, were cut by vandals who objected to its reporting on police repression of protests by teachers. The station had been a target of attack since the 2009 coup.

Ten journalists were killed by unknown actors in 2010, making Honduras one of the most dangerous countries in the world to be a journalist. In a period of seven weeks early in the year, six journalists were murdered. The lack of serious investigation made this killing spree even more controversial, as Minister of Security Oscar Alvarez claimed

that there was nothing to indicate that these murders were a result of their journalistic work. In March 2010, Joseph Hernández Ochoa of the privately owned Canal 5 TV station was killed while driving home in Tegucigalpa, the capital. The attack had likely targeted journalist Karol Cabrera, who worked for the state-owned Canal 8 TV station and also hosted a show on the privately owned radio station Radio Cadena Voces (RCV), and who was in the car with Ochoa at the time of the shooting. Cabrera, who had received multiple threats in connection with her work, was shot and seriously injured in the attack. The investigation was still underway at year's end, and Cabrera had fled the country.

In another deadly attack against journalists, Nahúm Palacios Arteaga, news editor of television station Televisora de Aguán-Canal 5, was killed in Tocoa. There was no autopsy and officials did not gather evidence from his body before the burial, showing the high level of impunity in cases involving the killing of journalists. Additionally, prosecutors have filed charges in only two of the 10 murders because of the difficult investigation laws. Other journalists killed include David Meza Montesinos of Abriendo Brecha TV and radio El Patio; Bayardo Mairena of Canal 4 TV; Manuel Juárez of Radio Excelsior; Luis Antonio Chévez of radio W105; Georgino Orellana of Televisión de Honduras; and Luis Arturo Mondragón of Canal 19 TV. In February, President Lobo expressed his determination to bring to justice those responsible for the murder of journalists, but little had been done at year's end.

In addition to murders, several journalists received death threats throughout the year. Some were assaulted by supporters of the 2009 ousted president Zelaya, as well as by supporters of the administration of President Lobo. In August 2010, journalists Nelson Joaquín Murillo of Radio América and Amilcar Luque of *La Tribuna* were attacked by members of the National People's Resistance Front, a wide coalition of organizations that support to restoration of Zelaya. Meanwhile, René Rojas, host of the radio/television program *Libre Expresión* was harassed in September for exposing local traffic police abuses.

Although the independent media sector is active and can report without government restriction, most media outlets are owned by a small group of business magnates who have political and commercial interests and exercise considerable control over media content. This contributes to the manipulation of state advertising that is reportedly used to secure favorable coverage, and also influences the political and factual content of the reporting. Honduras has nine daily newspapers, six private television stations, and five radio stations that broadcast nationally, one of which is state-owned. The broadcast sector is growing as a result of increased investment throughout the country. However, community radio stations are not clearly recognized by law, which means that they operate under threat of closure. 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 11 percent of the population had access to the internet in 2010, but poor infrastructure in the rural areas limits internet accessibility. The government did not restrict

access to the internet until the 2009 coup, and following these events, access to the internet was hindered because of politically motivated power outages.