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Panama: Press Freedoms Threatened

by Sean Mattson

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A growing list of the media's struggles under the administration of President Ricardo Martinelli hark back to the dark days of Panama's military dictatorship—and are at odds with the First World future Martinelli envisions for the Central American nation. While the abuses do not point to a lasting regression of press freedoms in Panama, says the editor of a leading Panama City newspaper, official attacks on the press have sparked international condemnation and stoked fears that progress on press freedom has stalled under Martinelli.

"The fundamental problem in the first 10 months of the Martinelli administration in its relationship with the media has been basically that it feels a bit of irritability in the face of publication of determined angles of the news," said Guido Rodríguez, director of Panamá América newspaper. "There have been attempts, and expressed attempts, to regulate the content of the media."

In January, Dalia Bernal, a legislator with Martinelli's Cambio Democrático party, proposed reactivating the dictatorship-era Junta de Censura (censorship council). The proposal later substituted "censorship" with "self-regulation" and did not reach formal debate in Congress. But it followed administration complaints about the violent content of newscasts—a reflection of increased violence—and risqué soap operas. The proposal was criticized by the Inter American Press Association (IAPA).

US$351,000 for "moral damages"

IAPA also pounced on a May ruling that Panamanian broadsheet La Prensa pay a US$300,000 fine—plus US$51,000 in legal costs—in a libel suit for reporting on the dismissal of a government prosecutor. The official, Argentina Barrera, alleged "moral damage" and "post-traumatic stress" against La Prensa, which had based a 2005 story on her dismissal on an official press release.

"The risk here is that a dangerous legal precedent is being set, which makes the news media and journalists responsible for official information that originates from government sources," said IAPA president Alejandro Aguirre, in a statement on the case.

La Prensa appealed the ruling. The newspaper noted that no other media outlet that reported on her dismissal—which was later overturned—was sued. The legal complaint was based on a headline that included the word corruptos, alluding to corrupt officials, though the article in question did not accuse the official of being corrupt.

"The sentence is based on the interpretation of a headline," said Rodríguez.

Panama's courts are no fans of a free press. The ruling is just the latest against journalism in Panama to be chronicled by IAPA. Last year, Jean Marcel Chéry, editor of El Siglo newspaper, was sentenced
Chéry ran afoul of the current administration for El Siglo's critical reporting on Panama City's garbage-collection problems, which became a national government issue once heaps of trash rotting in the tropical heat overwhelmed the city government. Chéry said he was threatened in a series of telephone messages from Martinelli's Communications Secretary Alfredo Prieto about the reporting, according to La Prensa.

Prieto denied the accusations. Panamá América's Rodríguez said the exchange between Prieto and Chéry revealed "the kind of expressed nonconformity that exists on occasion by state functionaries regarding the slant of the news."

Freedom of information "paused"

In the face of the criticism, Martinelli has voiced support for a free press but problems persist. In May, a Panamá América photographer was beaten up by a security guard and a national police officer after photographing interim Attorney General Giuseppe Bonissi at a social event. The photographer said he had been threatened prior to the attack by one of Bonissi's security guards. Bonissi denied the allegations, and Panamá América's editor said there was not enough evidence in the case to pin blame on the official.

In another highly publicized incident, officials including members of the Servicio de Protección Institucional (SPI)—the police division responsible for presidential security—forbade a TV crew from filming on the Cinta Costera, a thoroughfare and public park on Panama City's waterfront. "One of the agents threatened to break the cameraman's camera," broadcaster TVN recounted on its Web site.

Journalists complain the government has tried to centralize information through the Secretaría de Comunicación, where the telephone often goes unanswered during work hours. Interview requests routinely go unanswered, and even straightforward information is hard to squeeze from hermetic officials. This contrasts with a previous administration where top Cabinet members routinely answered cell-phone calls from the press.

"Certainly there has been a type of pause in matters of access to information," said Rodríguez, adding that Panama has had constitutionally guaranteed information access sin 2004. "When there is little [transparency], speculation and suspicions that something is being hidden can possibly begin."

Costa Rica media attack backfires

So far, the only media outlet to launch an unfettered attack on the Martinelli administration has been an obscure Costa Rica online publication, ElPais.cr. The Web site alleges links between Martinelli and his cousin Ramón Martinelli, a former treasurer for Martinelli's Cambio Democrático party who was arrested in Mexico for alleged links to the Beltrán Leyva narcotics cartel.

The source of the allegations remains a mystery but ElPais.cr might have obtained leaked documents from the attorney general's office, whose head was replaced by Martinelli in a
controversial move. The allegations have been largely dismissed by Panama's mainstream press, but Martinelli has drawn considerable attention to the allegations by going on television to say he had long ago distanced himself from his cousin. The president's office then announced plans to file charges in Costa Rica against ElPais.cr for "defaming Panama, after considering that the publications threaten the security of the state and the Panama Canal."

"I told [President Martinelli] that the issue...in Panama had not been echoed in any serious media," said Rodríguez. "But by going to a television station to talk about the issue, he was the one to sow the information in Panama and then it became a matter of national interest."

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