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Panama Press Freedom Questioned as Journalists Face Official and Anonymous Criticism

by Sean Mattson

Category/Department: Panama

Published: Thursday, May 26, 2011

President Ricardo Martinelli’s administration is again under fire regarding press-freedom concerns, as a recent anonymous video posted to YouTube and a TV spot by his political party have questioned the credibility of a number of journalists. The campaign to discredit reporting has been considered retaliation for the media publicizing embarrassing WikiLeaks cables and for critical reporting, and comes as Panama was already facing increased criticism, including from the US, for the treatment of journalists.

A recent video on YouTube attacked the credibility of journalists including Lina Vega Abad, who heads daily newspaper’s investigative unit. Radio and TV news personality Álvaro Alvarado was also targeted in the anonymous video. The April clip accused Vega of manipulating the news because of her alleged links to the opposition Partido Revolucionario Democrático (PRD), Martinelli’s main political opponent. The video, narrated by digitally altered voices, follows similar anonymous clips criticizing’s columnist Mónica Palm, who was targeted via YouTube last year.

Martinelli’s Cambio Democrático (CD) party also ran a TV clip criticizing’s Santiago Cumblera, according to media reports.

"These methods suggest an act of crass vengeance by those in power against the media that relayed the information released by WikiLeaks," Reporters Without Borders (RSF) said in a statement released on its Web site. "Such information is in the public interest. The judicial authorities must investigate the origin of these despicable videos and the political endorsement they appear to received, even if it means going to the heart of the presidency."

has recently taken the lead in publishing cables from the US Embassy in Panama that have painted an unflattering image of the president and some of his top collaborators, including Tourism Minister Salomón Shamah.

According to excerpts of the cables published by the newspaper, Shamah was allegedly linked to drug traffickers (NotiCen, April 14, 2011). The government vehemently denies the allegations, which so far remain poorly detailed in the excerpts of the published cables, and no formal accusations or charges against Shamah have been reported.

The Inter American Press Association (IAPA) also weighed in on the videos and called on the government to investigate. "It is clear that the journalists are being discredited to harm their reputations and consequently undermine their credibility before the public; so it is the government’s responsibility to investigate the matter and punish those responsible in order to ensure freedom of the press," said IAPA president Gonzalo Marroquín in a May statement.

IAPA also mentioned Alvarado’s recent complaints of a campaign to discredit the popular TV and radio personality who is a harsh critic of the government. "In its recent biannual report on the state of press freedom in the Western Hemisphere the IAPA warned of the state of confrontation that
exists between the government and the press in Panama, declaring that the federal administration
there tends ‘to blame the news media for some situations and events that are of a public nature,’" the IAPA’s statement concluded.

The blame-the-media game continued when Martinelli was widely reported as saying Shamah was
going to be replaced. The president’s office quickly followed Martinelli’s statement saying that the
president’s statement had been misinterpreted.

"This government is, without a doubt, unprecedented," 's front-page opinion column declared
when referring to the apparent instantaneous about-face regarding Shamah's fate. "[Martinelli’s] statement was clear and convincing, it was not open to interpretations." The column continued,
"Once again, the media is ‘guilty’ for the errors of the president."

While Martinelli has called for a "national dialogue" on freedom of expression, he continues to
criticize the press. "There are media owners that have dark interests," said Martinelli on May 23,
according to , adding that he refused to be more specific.

The statement follows criticism from the president a week earlier that journalists are publishing
biased news, reported.

Growing concern
Panama’s ranking on RSF’s Press Freedom Index for 2010 was 81 out of 178 ranked countries, a
precipitous drop from the 55th position a year earlier. Well off its best-ever ranking of 39 in 2006, the
position was Panama’s lowest since RSF first published the index in 2002.

"The press freedom situation has deteriorated significantly since Martinelli became president. There
have been cases of journalists being detained, deported, or banned from working," said RSF in its
statement on the recent clips. Others are taking note.

The report noted that "individuals generally enjoyed freedom of expression" and that the
international press and independent media operated freely. But those who provoked the ire of the
administration occasionally heard from the highest-ranking officials, journalists told the report’s
author.

"Journalists alleged that members of the government, including President Martinelli and Secretary
of Communication Alfredo Prieto, telephoned them to complain about stories printed or aired
concerning the government," said the report. "Journalists asserted that those calls had a chilling
effect, especially on reporters, resulting in frequent self-censorship. There was at least one report of
threats against a leading journalist by a member of the government."

The report noted that Panama’s legal system "allows prosecution of journalists for vague charges
related to exposing private information and documents, even those deemed of public interest.
The law also permits prosecution of journalists for publishing information restricted on national-
security grounds. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) asserted that these provisions threatened
freedom of speech and press."

The report did not note new legal proceedings against journalists last year but did note old cases
approaching conclusion in 2010, including a US$300,000 fine against La Prensa for a 2005 case and
the 18-day jailing of journalist Carlos Núñez López for a 2007 conviction regarding a 2004 story. Old
libel pardons issued by former President Mireya Moscoso (1994-2004) might have been overturned
as the nation’s Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) returned the cases to their "original state," the report noted, adding that clarification was needed to determine exactly what that meant.

Also last year, acting attorney general Giuseppe Bonissi "filed an opinion with the Supreme Court that stated the 2008 reform that decriminalized defamation or slander of high-ranking public officials was unconstitutional."

The report noted the brief detention in 2010 of Spaniard Francisco Gómez, a highly critical columnist at La Prensa, who was "voluntarily" evicted from Panama this year (NotiCen March 17, 2011).

At the other end of the spectrum, Martinelli issued a pardon in 2010 in a highly criticized ruling that banned two journalists from exercising their trade for a year and gave them the option of paying a fine or serving a year in jail.

Amnesty International’s annual report on human rights, released in May, also made a brief mention of concerns of freedom of expression in Panama.

National dialogue

Martinelli this month called for a "national dialogue" on freedom of expression, responding to a call from Panama’s Archbishop José Domingo Ulloa to address press-freedom concerns in January, local media reported.

Martinelli asked the Catholic leader to act as a mediator in the yet-undefined dialogue, and Spanish newswire EFE reported that Ulloa has accepted but that little advance has been made on establishing an agenda.

It is also not clear what this dialogue with journalists intends to accomplish. The newspaper reported that Martinelli wrote in his invitation to Ulloa that he has on numerous occasions publicly committed to upholding the fundamental rights of a democracy. However, "with the same conviction, responsibility, and frankness I have pointed out something that some do not seem willing to understand: that these same rights impose duties and responsibilities on both leaders and the governed."

Reaction to the president’s call has been mixed. reported that the president of the Colegio Nacional de Periodistas (CONAPE), Grisel Bethancourt, said the organization is open to debate if it strengthens the democratic system but that freedom of speech is non-negotiable.

Euclides M. Corro, an opinion columnist for, a Panamanian online news publication, wrote that both Panama’s press and the government need to bring honesty to the table. "If the government does not recognize that in a certain way it has manipulated its ‘powers’ to terrify national journalism, then it’s useless that we sit down and converse," he wrote. "In the same fashion, the media should make a list of some abuses that are committed ‘in the name of freedom of expression.’"

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