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Press Organization Targets Progressive Governments

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The consolidation of progressive governments in various South American countries is causing a resurgence of the Miami-based Sociedad Interamericana de Prensa (SIP), a powerful organization that includes owners of the major media outlets in North, Central, and South America.

For various reasons, the organization—which in recent years has maintained a low profile—has unleashed an intense campaign against the governments of Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela, broadly accusing them of authoritarian practices reminiscent of dictatorial regimes.

In all cases, the SIP's preaching appears under the banner of defending freedom of expression, a principle that objectively has been neither violated nor diminished in any of the target countries, where press and speech freedoms enjoy excellent health. Proof is easily obtained by examining the Web sites of the major media in those countries.

In November, the SIP held its 66th annual meeting in Mérida, Mexico. In a report read to the more than 1,000 delegates at the meeting, the organization proclaimed itself "guardian and defender" of civil liberties and, according to an Associated Press report dated Nov. 7, warned that "across the Americas there are renewed efforts to impose legal provisions aimed at 'regulating' the operations of news media. While often couched in high-sounding terms, these are blatant attempts to control and limit the free flow of information." The document referred especially to the four above-mentioned countries.

**Bolivia’s anti-discrimination law criticized**

In the presentation of the country reports, the SIP said that "in Bolivia, a law intended to target racism and discrimination contains language that, in effect, limits freedom of the press."

The organization alludes to a law against racism and discrimination—adopted at the recommendation of the UN—that punishes press outlets that directly or indirectly express xenophobic attitudes or ideas that promote racial, ethnic, religious, or gender hatred (NotiSur, Nov. 5, 2010).

"Other Latin American countries, such as Brazil, Ecuador, and Uruguay, are also considering laws to regulate the media through so-called social control, which actually provides the governments the means with which to strangle the media," said SIP.

"What we see in Bolivia is what is occurring with all the governments of what is called the Bolivarian axis, I mean that the recipe is repeated from one place to another: it is applied in Venezuela, it is applied in Ecuador, it is applied in Bolivia, it is applied in Argentina, although with some variations," said Claudio Paolillo, member of SIP’s Comisión de Libertad de Prensa e Información and director of the Uruguayan weekly Búsqueda.

Paolillo failed to mention that three weeks earlier, on Oct. 17, he had been in Bolivia as part of a SIP delegation that went to La Paz at the invitation of SIP Bolivian associates, who had complained that the law threatened freedom of speech. Nor did he point out that the delegation had, in fact, found
that radio and television stations and newspapers daily send out aberrant messages with a strong racist content.

Paolillo said, during a session of the Comisión de Libertad de Prensa e Información, "The system practiced in those countries consists of winning elections through the popular vote and then obtaining a circumstantial majority in the Congress...taking advantage of the moment to build without a pause a legal framework that little by little cuts off liberties to end up in despotic regimes that legitimize themselves by insisting that they are only responding to existing laws."

Despite the harshness of this description of the constitutional and democratic government of President Evo Morales, the report contradicts that interpretation by saying that the anti-racism law is "a noble and just law."

What happens, said the report, is that the authorities attempt to use it to "remove from circulation media and their owners not aligned with the government party, using any kind of subtle maneuver."

, the weekly newspaper Paolillo directs, began during the 1973-1985 Uruguayan dictatorship, and its founder and a current member of the governing board is Danilo Arbilla, former press and communications director of that bloody military regime.

Organization sides with paper company against Argentine government

The SIP report on Argentina said that the constitutional and democratic government of President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner is waging a "harassment campaign" against the company Papel Prensa (PP), the nation's only newsprint manufacturer. In a resolution at the end of the meeting, SIP warned that "official control on this basic supply may be used as an element of indirect pressure over the press," and it urged "public powers in Argentina to maintain the policy of free production, import, and marketing of paper, which for many long years has been the norm in Argentina, thus preventing state intervention in private companies."

Papel Prensa is a business with a shady history (NotiSur, Oct. 1, 2010). It was created in the early 1970s by banker David Graiver, who managed the finances of the Montonero guerrilla group. Shortly after the installation of the 1976-1983 military dictatorship, the new regime confiscated Graiver's stock and divided it between the state and the dailies Clarín and La Nación, the two largest newspapers in the country. Since that time, the state has not played an active role in the company and left its operations in the hands of the two large dailies, which have been denounced for selling paper to themselves at a subsidized price and charging the competition up to 40% more.

What the Argentine government is now trying to do—and what SIP is complaining about—is to participate in the management of the company and guarantee the sale of paper at the same price to all buyers, understanding, said President Fernández de Kirchner, that "without paper for all, there is no freedom of expression." The dailies , , and —not members of SIP—back the government in its confrontation with and .

Ecuador and Venezuela also charged with violating press freedom

In the report on Ecuador, SIP complained that the media have experienced "serious threats" since the attempted coup last Sept. 30 (NotiSur, Oct. 15, 2010 ). The organization doubts that an anti-democratic assault occurred and says that to apply its program of change, the constitutional government of President Rafael Correa "needs to silence the press."
Ecuador's Vice Foreign Minister Kintto Lucas—a distinguished longtime journalist—said that "SIP knows very well that that is not the situation," adding that "what bothers business leaders is a constitutional provision that establishes that bankers or leaders of any other entity engaged in financial activity cannot own media companies" (NotiSur, Sept. 10, 2010).

The Constitution approved by 61% of Ecuadorans in July 2008—26 months before the attempted coup on Sept. 30, 2010, which the SIP claims was the trigger for "serious threats" against the media—established that in October 2010 bankers would have to divest their stock in all information media (radio, television, and newspapers).

Regarding Venezuela, the SIP report condemned the recently passed media law (Ley de Responsabilidad Social en Radio y Televisión), which establishes sanctions when the media or media users employ Web sites to "manipulate, incite magnicide, promote public disorder, publish messages contrary to national security, or divulge images and sounds with deviant sexual content."

The law also requires Internet service providers to establish mechanisms to allow restrictions on disseminating alarmist messages.

Paolillo said that, "with these reforms, we are facing one of the greatest abuses of this decade against the right to publish information." He added that the law "will prohibit even the free use of Facebook, Twitter, and other social networks."

Until now, nothing of the sort has happened, and Venezuela's constitutional President Hugo Chávez is the person most interested in it not happening—in Facebook and Twitter remaining freely accessible—because he is one of the major Venezuelan promoters of such networks, using them to disseminate his opinions and decisions.

Perhaps because, 18 months after the coup that toppled the constitutional Honduran President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya (NotiCen, July 2, 2009), the media have been unable to sanitize their image of complicity in that serious episode in the democratic history of Latin America, the vast majority of dailies in the region did not give the SIP meeting the relevancy that international news agencies gave it, especially the Associated Press.

Nevertheless, strong criticisms were widely reproduced. Bolivian government spokesperson Iván Canelas said that, "throughout its history, the SIP has shown itself to be the main organization that has censored its own journalists and violated their freedom of expression." In statements to the official Bolivian news agency, Canelas added that, "after backing all the coups that have occurred in Latin American, the most recent of which toppled the democratic government of Honduras, the SIP has no ethical or moral standing to talk about liberties."

Radio Nederland quoted Canadian journalist Jean-Guy Allard, who said that SIP was "complicit" in the Honduran coup "because among those who backed that threat to democracy were former President Carlos Roberto Flores Facussé [1998-2002], owner of the daily La Tribuna, and Jorge Canahuati Larach, owner of and , the newspapers with the largest circulation in Honduras and the only Honduran members of SIP."

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