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## Public Protest Pushes Mexican Radio Station to Reinstate Prominent Journalist

by Lindajoy Fenley

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A prominent Mexican journalist fired last month after reporting allegations that Mexico's president had an alcohol problem returned to her news show after a two-week hiatus filled with protests against censorship at home and abroad. Carmen Aristegui's first report on the reinstated Multivisión news show (MVS Noticias) she anchors focused again on President Felipe Calderón. This time she recapped a story in the Mexico City daily newspaper about a Wikileaks report of US Embassy concerns in 2006 that the then President-elect Calderón lacked the political strength required of a head of state.

The Wikileaks Web site, which made public previously confidential diplomatic cables, also addressed other issues involving Mexico, including reports that the Mexican government had allowed FBI agents to question undocumented immigrants, mostly from Central America, being held in Mexican jails ([SourceMex, Feb. 2, 2011](#)).

Recognized for independent reporting with kudos such as Columbia University's Maria Moors Cabot Award and national journalism awards in Mexico, Aristegui became a cause célèbre in her own country because listeners consider her to be the voice of the people—in essence, their own voice. Her dismissal sparked an intense public debate on freedom of expression in offices and cafés around the country and even beyond Mexico's borders.

The debate reverberated over the Internet with at least three people opening Facebook pages to protest the firing and many others changing their own profile photos to one of the censored journalist with a black band over her mouth. The Mexico City daily business newspaper reported that Lydia Cacho, a crusading journalist who also is a symbol for freedom of expression in Mexico, sent Twitter messages supporting Aristegui immediately after MVS fired the respected news-show anchor.

Cacho was kidnapped and transported across state lines to Puebla state, where she was imprisoned on bogus charges of libel and defamation ([SourceMex, Feb. 22, 2006](#)). The kidnapping was allegedly ordered by former Puebla Gov. Mario Marín Torres on behalf of his friend, Puebla businessman Kamel Nacif ([SourceMex, Sept. 27, 2006](#)) and ([Dec. 5, 2007](#)).

Cacho filed a complaint against Marín alleging that the governor had violated her individual rights. The court, in a stunning decision in 2007, ruled in favor of the Puebla governor ([SourceMex, Dec. 5, 2007](#)).

Just as Aristegui supporters continued to comment on social media, government officials also used the Internet to comment on the case. The BBC reported that Labor Secretary Javier Lozano twittered, "Just as we respect the right of a media company to contract an anchor, we also respect its right to terminate his/her contract."

The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) issued a statement calling Aristegui's firing "troubling and inappropriate," and others, including Raúl Trejo Delarbre, president of

the Asociación Mexicana de Derecho a la Información (AMEDI), and Frank La Rue, UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, weighed in on her side.

Shortly after her reinstatement, Aristegui cited La Rue's call for greater legal protection of journalists and freedom of expression in Mexico. La Rue and Catalina Botero of the Organization of American States (OAS) had visited Mexico last year to gather information about threats to journalists and the environment for freedom of expression in Mexico. According to press reports at the time, their findings focused on journalist deaths blamed on organized crime. By some estimates, as many as 14 writers and editors were murdered in Mexico in 2010. The majority were killed in the first half of the year ([SourceMex, July 14, 2010](#)).

### *Government denies allegations*

Aristegui—who had joined MVS after a Grupo Televisa radio station did not renew her annual contract several years ago—was terminated from MVS after she reported opposition lawmakers displayed a banner Feb. 3 with an image of the president ogling three wine glasses and an inflammatory message: "Would you let a drunk drive your car?....Why do you let one run the country?"

Aristegui challenged the government to answer the charge by asking, "Does the president have a problem with alcoholism or not?"

Station managers asked her to apologize to the president, but she did not. Following her dismissal for allegedly breaching her station's code of ethics by reporting on rumors, Aristegui—who meanwhile also continued to report news on CNN's Spanish-language broadcasts—held a press conference in which she denied any wrongdoing. She said that her dismissal may have been a bargaining chip in the network's current application for greater transmitting bandwidth. MVS and the government denied that allegation.

A presidential spokesman said Aristegui's comments did not warrant comment and reiterated that President Calderón enjoys good health and is able to competently fulfill the demands of his busy presidential schedule without any problem. Calderón has not made any public comment on his use of alcohol.

The intense discussion about Aristegui increased through the weekend when her supporters—including one of the congressmen who had sparked the discussion by unfurling the banner about the president—protested by marching to Los Pinos, the presidential palace.

On Feb. 15, almost 10 days after she was fired, the journalist and the network jointly announced her popular daily news program would resume Feb. 21. In addition, MVS Radio stated it would create an arbitration process to resolve future controversies regarding content.

Back on the air, Aristegui thanked her listeners (and, presumably, her bosses) for allowing her news team to transmit again. She read congratulatory messages from AMEDI and the UN Special Rapporteur on press freedom.

The UN's La Rue hailed her return as a victory for freedom of expression and urged the Mexican government to foster the basic changes needed to ensure such freedom in the future. He said there is a need for "a regulatory framework that offers legal certainty, promotes the reversal of

the concentration of radio and television, and contributes to generating a pluralist media space accessible to all sectors of the population."

### *Easing taboo against criticizing officials*

The Aristegui affair illustrates the continuing demise of a long-standing taboo against criticizing public officials, particularly the revered position of the president. Since breaking the 70-year rule of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in 1994, Mexico's citizens have continued to push for greater democracy and freedom of expression, including the right to question their leaders.

Aristegui, a recognized expert on national politics who speaks regularly at academic forums and political debates, is known for her ability to criticize and question. Although she was temporarily suspended from her job, her return to the airwaves has strengthened her popularity and the cause of press freedom in Mexico.

The radio program she once again hosts attracts a large morning audience from 6 a.m. to 10 a.m., Mexico City time, and can be monitored on the Internet at <http://www.noticiasmvs.com/mvsPlayer/>

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