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Veracruz Reporter Becomes Fifth Journalist Killed in Mexico in 2011

by Carlos Navarro

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The murder of journalist Yolanda Ordaz de la Cruz in Veracruz state this year caused a greater outcry than most recent killings of reporters and editors in Mexico. The death of Ordaz was another reminder of the perils that writers, editors, publishers, and other editorial employees have to face as part of their jobs. But the case became even more controversial because of comments made by state attorney general Reynaldo Escobar Pérez in the aftermath of the killing. Escobar suggested that Ordaz was probably killed because of her connections to organized crime and not because of her reporting.

Ordaz, a police reporter for the statewide newspaper, was the fifth journalist killed in Mexico this year. She was the second reporter and third editorial employee of killed in recent weeks in Veracruz. In June, columnist Miguel Ángel López Velasco was killed at his home along with his wife Agustina Solana and son Misael López Solana, a photographer for the newspaper.

The other journalist killed in Veracruz this year was Noel López Olguín, a reporter for the weekly newspapers and the daily López Olguín disappeared in March, and his body was found on June 1.

A fifth journalist killed this year was Ángel Castillo Corona, a columnist for the daily newspaper. Castillo, who was also communications director for the municipality of Ocuilan, was killed along with his 16-year-old son near the town of Santiago Tianguitenco in México state.

State prosecutor's comments create broad outcry

Authorities discovered Ordaz's body behind the offices of another newspaper and near a radio station in the neighboring city of Boca del Rio. State attorney general Escobar Pérez said Ordaz's throat had been slit and a message was found with the body with the inscription, "Friends also betray. Sincerely, Carranza."

Escobar said authorities are investigating former traffic police officer Juan Carlos Carranza Saavedra as the author of the note. But the prosecutor suggested that the killing had nothing to do with Ordaz's coverage of crime but with possible links to Carranza.

"These deplorable actions don't have anything to do with the exercise of the journalistic profession," Escobar told reporters. "It is important to point out that we are investigating allegations of a presumed relation between journalists and organized crime, which places [these journalists] in a very vulnerable and risky position."

The state attorney general's comments prompted an angry response from, which published an editorial criticizing the prosecutor for making assumptions without completing an investigation. The editorial called for Escobar to resign, suggesting that his stance was disrespectful and slanderous toward Yolanda Ordaz. "What proof does he have? How does he know what he is saying is true," asked the editorial.

The newspaper called on Veracruz Gov. Javier Duarte to immediately dismiss Escobar. "Respectfully, but also with much determination, we ask Gov. Duarte not only to remove him from his post but to put him on trial for his irresponsible and criminal performance in the state attorney general's office."

The editorial pointed out that the state's press corps has been under siege for at least the past six years. "We at have faced many threats and even kidnappings. And, despite those risks, we have managed to provide complete information to the public. But we cannot function without the support of authorities."

The murders of Ordaz, López Velasco, and López Solana prompted five reporters to submit their resignations and move out of state. The situation raised strong concerns among state legislators.

"The free exercise of their profession is in danger, and we cannot allow this to continue," said state legislator Fernando Yunes Márquez, who chairs the justice committee (Comisión de Procuración de Justicia) in the Veracruz legislature. Yunes joined in asking for Escobar's resignation.

Escobar's comments also elicited strong condemnation from international organizations that have consistently criticized the government's failure to protect reporters, including the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF), and the Inter-American Press Association (IAPA).

"In this case, as in most of the previous ones, which are still unpunished, we are outraged by the way the local authorities rule out any link with the victim's work as a journalist and encourage nasty rumors about the victim even before they start investigating the case," RSF said in a statement.

RSF said there is a strong probability that organized crime had a hand in Ordaz's death but not in the manner that Escobar had implied. "Ordaz was one of those journalists who were exposed to danger because of their reporting specialty," said the Paris-based press rights organization. "At the same time, a link to organized crime obviously cannot be excluded in a state where three feared gangs, the Zetas, the Gulf cartel, and Michoacán's La Familia, operate. And it is hard not to link Ordaz's murder with that of her colleague, López, whose columns may have upset certain officials."

The CPJ had strong words for the Mexican federal government. "Yolanda Ordaz's murder is part of a troubling lethal trend that has made Veracruz an extremely dangerous place to be a journalist," said Carlos Lauría, CPJ's senior program coordinator for the Americas. "We urge Mexican authorities to conduct a thorough investigation, establish the motives of the crime, and put an end to impunity in journalists' slaying by bringing Ordaz's killers to justice."

Other human rights advocates such as Mexico's Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH), the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IAHCR), and the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) each joined in condemning the latest journalist killing in Mexico.

"The practice of journalism has to be guaranteed, and there needs to be an end to the impunity that is also victimizing the field," said the CNDH.

"Mexico must implement a policy of prevention, protection, and prosecution to address the perils that journalists and other communicators face," said the IACHR.

International press organizations have designated Mexico as one of the world's most dangerous countries for journalists ([SourceMex, Feb. 25, 2009](#)). The CNDH, which has long complained about

government inaction to protect journalists ([SourceMex, Feb. 24, 2010](#)), said deaths have increased steadily over the past few months, with 71 journalists killed and another 13 disappeared since 2000.

Canvass pollsters kidnapped in Michoacán

Dangers are not limited to journalists in the industries that disseminate information to the public. In early August, nine canvass workers were kidnapped in a region of Michoacán state near Apatzingan, an area controlled by the drug cartel La Familia and its offshoot group, the Caballeros Templarios (Knights Templar). The workers, six from the polling organizations Consulta Mitofsky and three from Parametría, were abducted as they canvassed homes in the area to collect information about voter preferences ahead of the elections on Nov. 13, which include the races for governor, mayor, and state legislature. All nine were released unharmed after being held for a few days.

Both companies were hired by the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), which governs the state.

"We believe this could be a consequence of one of the criminal groups that operate in the area," Michoacán state prosecutor Jesus Montejano said in a radio interview.

In the aftermath of the disappearance, Consulta Mitofsky president Roy Campos filed a complaint with the state attorney general's office asking for the immediate intervention of law-enforcement authorities in the matter.

Parametría and Mitofsky each asked the government to provide greater protection for polling organizations. "The research of public opinion is a fundamental function in modern democracies," Parametría said in a statement. "This work requires that workers be sent throughout the country. Because of the importance of this work, which is essential for the electoral process, we reiterate our request that authorities provide us the conditions for us to conduct our work."

"We send a clear message to the authorities that they cannot allow the best of our country, its people, to be prevented from working in safety and liberty," Mitofsky said.

Federal authorities joined state officials in the search for the pollsters in the area near the communities of Apatzingán, Parácuaro, and Mújica. But the effort did not last long, as they were released just a few days after they were abducted. In an interview with Milenio TV, Parametría director Francisco Abundis said his three canvassers were not threatened by their captors but were shaken up by the experience. "We think they were waiting to identify them to make sure they weren't people working undercover," Abundis said of the captors.

But Abundis raised concerns that the abduction might affect the manner in which polling organizations gather data. "Unfortunately, we've run into a situation in which we don't know how we're going to be able to work," said the Parametría official. "Our options are either an information blackout or to continue working in risky situations."

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