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Carlos Navarro

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Veracruz Government Again Accused of Covering Up Motive for Journalist’s Murder

by Carlos Navarro
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Javier Duarte de Ochoa began his term as governor of Veracruz state on Dec. 1, 2010. Since that time, 10 journalists have been murdered, four others have disappeared, and 132 attacks have been launched against news organizations in the state. While Veracruz has always been one of the most dangerous states in Mexico for reporters, editors, photographers, and others employed in the news business (SourceMex, April 20, 2005, April 18, 2007, and Jan. 9, 2008), journalist rights organizations argue that the situation has worsened during the current administration. There are allegations that the governor has attempted to silence criticism from the press and has covered up two murders.

The first alleged cover-up, in April 2013, involved the case of Regina Martínez, an investigative reporter for the weekly news magazine Proceso. Martínez, who was strangled and beaten to death, had been investigating several powerful individuals in Veracruz. State authorities said their investigation had indicated that Martínez was killed during a robbery. Journalist organizations, however, disputed the state’s official explanation, arguing that Martínez was killed because of her work and that the person accused of the murder was framed (SourceMex, April 24, 2013).

Governor blames ‘personal vendetta’ for latest death

The scenario appeared to repeat itself in February 2014, following the kidnapping and murder of journalist Gregorio Jiménez de la Cruz, whose body was discovered in a clandestine grave along with a local labor leader and a taxi driver. Jiménez de la Cruz, a crime reporter for the Veracruz-based news agency Notisur and the daily newspaper El Liberal del Sur, was investigating a series of abductions and murders in the coastal city of Coatzacoalcos just days before his body was discovered in the same grave as one of his subjects, Ernesto Ruíz Guillén, a local official for the Confederación de Trabajadores de Mexico (CTM).

Gregorio Antonio Hernández, a reporter for Radio Lobo, said he is certain that Jiménez de la Cruz was killed because of his journalism work "We believe that his investigation of these cases is the reason why our comrade is dead," Hernández said in an interview on the national radio network MVS Noticias.

The Duarte administration had an entirely different take on the murder, saying this was simply a case of revenge. Authorities said their investigation indicated the killing was the result of a personal "vendetta" between Jiménez and Teresa de Jesús Hernández Cruz, a neighbor and the owner of a local bar, over a romantic relationship gone sour between her son and his daughter. To prove their point, authorities published confessions by five individuals accused of carrying out the murder, who said they were hired and paid to carry out the crime. Hernández reportedly also confessed to being the intellectual author of the murder.

The newspaper El Diario de Xalapa reported that the six accused individuals recanted their initial confession during a court hearing, saying they had been tortured into presenting false information.
State prosecutor resigns

The court statements from the six accused individuals turned up the heat on the Duarte administration. While the governor did not budge from his position, state prosecutor Amadeo Flores Espinosa submitted his resignation and was promptly replaced by Luis Ángel Bravo Contreras. The new prosecutor, the fourth individual to hold that post in the first three years of the Duarte government, was ratified by the state legislature despite unresolved charges that he attacked a judge and later attempted to bribe him, according to Proceso.

For many defenders of press rights, Flores Espinosa’s resignation was a good first step, but they said much more action was needed to address the case. Journalists in Mexico and overseas said a federal investigation was needed to clarify the situation. Several prestigious press organizations—the Inter American Press Association (IAPA), Reporters Without Borders (RSF), the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Periodistas de a Pie, Artículo 19, and the National Association of Hispanic Journalists (NAHJ)—were among those calling for authorities to look into the actions of the Duarte administration. Human rights advocates also added their voice to this demand. "In the case of Gregorio Jiménez, this investigation should consider the full possibility that his murder was a consequence of his work as a journalist," said Amnesty International (AI).

Periodistas de a Pie and Artículo 19, two journalist rights organizations based in Mexico, joined reporters, editors and photographers at a dozen marches around the country to urge for greater protections for journalists in Mexico. The campaign was dubbed "Prensa no disparen" (I am a member of the press, do not shoot me). "We do not want to continue burying our colleagues," one speaker said at the march through the streets of Xalapa, the capital city of Veracruz.

The protest in Xalapa occurred simultaneously with demonstrations in cities like Reynosa in Tamaulipas state, which also has been a dangerous place for journalists (SourceMex, Feb. 20, 2013). Led by the Unión de Periodistas Democráticos (UPD) and other groups, demonstrators in Reynosa demanded that the Tamaulipas state government take measures to guarantee that journalists can carry out their work free from the threat of violence.

"At the end of the day, what we want, above all, is respect for our safety and respect for the work that we do each day, which allows us to earn a living and support our families," UPD director Miguel Turriza García said.

The main protest, however, took place in Xalapa, where demonstrators marched through the city streets to the Plaza Lerdo, where they held a rally. In a communiqué intended as a national message, demonstrators said that Veracruz "has become a symbol of death for journalists, although murders have occurred in many parts of the country." They noted that at least 87 people employed in the media had been murdered between 2000 and 2014, and 20 others had disappeared.

While the threat to journalists was a problem long before Duarte came into office, the demonstrators said his administration has done little to solve the problem and has been involved in a cover-up of at least two murders.

The "most dangerous governor" for journalists

The journalists used the rally to criticize Duarte and to call for the resignation of public safety director Arturo Bermúdez Zurita. "Javier Duarte de Ochoa, the most dangerous governor for journalists," read a sign. Another sign said, "And Bermúdez, when does he resign?"
Duarte also came under strong criticism in the print media. José Gil Olmos, a columnist for Proceso, said the Veracruz governor wants the news media to keep criticism of his administration to a minimum while casting his administration in a favorable light.

"No other governing executive in Mexico—and surely none in any other place in the world—has such a disastrous record as this governor from the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI)," said Olmos, pointing to statistics released by Artículo 19. The journalist rights organization has documented 10 deaths of journalists, four disappearances and 132 attacks against news media in Veracruz.

Other media outlets presented the same argument. "Mexico is a dangerous country for journalists. The state of Veracruz, led by Gov. Javier Duarte, is the best example of reporters lacking protection and armed groups, which intimidate and murder those journalists, going unpunished," said the Spanish-language daily newspaper La Opinión, based in Los Angeles, California.

The newspaper, which called for Duarte to step down, suggested that the governor was an accomplice to the murders because of his failure to guarantee protection for reporters and his refusal to conduct an honest investigation of their murders.

Rather than take the demands of journalists seriously, Duarte appears to be taking the opposite stance. This was evident in the appointment of Alberto Silva Ramos, former mayor of the community of Tuxpan, as his new spokesperson. Ramos replaced Gina Domínguez Colío, who left her post under intense criticism from the media.

In his first year as mayor of Tuxpan in 2011, Silva Ramos filed a lawsuit against journalist Jorge Ricárdez Manrique and media executives Isaias Armenta and Carlos Antonio Ortiz on charges that they tried to blackmail him with compromising photographs and a demand for a large sum of money. Ricárdez Manrique had earlier written a column suggesting that Silva Ramos was an inefficient and corrupt leader.

While there were many doubts about the veracity of the charges, Ricárdez Manrique spent several months in jail before gaining his release.

Some critics said Silva Ramos’ appointment was clearly political, since the new spokesperson had no prior experience in public relations or media relations. "Naming [Silva Ramos] to this post is a clear example of where the government of Javier Duarte stands," said the Coatzacoalcos-based online publication Diario Presencia. "While his former coordinator of social communications, María Gina Domínguez Colío, did not get along with the press, her successor … is a potential threat [to journalists]."

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