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Mexico City, Quintana Roo Legislatures Approve Initiatives to Protect Journalists

by Carlos Navarro

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The legislatures of Mexico City and Quintana Roo state approved initiatives in August designed to provide increased protection for reporters, editors, photographers, cartoonists, and other members of the media who work within their borders. Members of the media in at least two other states—Michoacán and Querétaro—have started to lobby their respective legislatures to enact similar protections for journalists. Supporters say this legislation is necessary at the state level because a federal initiative, approved in 2012 ([SourceMex, March 21, 2012](#)), has not provided adequate protection for journalists. Mexico has one of the highest rates of journalist murders in the world ([SourceMex, Feb. 5, 2014](#), and [Oct. 22, 2014](#)). By some estimates, at least 88 journalists have been murdered in Mexico since 2000.

The measures at the state level come in the wake of the murder of photojournalist Rubén Espinosa in Mexico City on July 31. Espinosa sought refuge in Mexico City, once considered safe for journalists, because of threats to his life in Veracruz ([SourceMex, Aug. 5, 2015](#)).

Mexico City law in the works for several years

The assassination of Espinosa prompted the administration of Mexico City Mayor Miguel Mancera to expedite a new mechanism to protect journalists and defenders of human rights who work in the Mexican capital. Mancera said the initiative had been in the works since 2012 but was only approved by the state legislature of the Federal District (Asamblea Legislativa del Distrito Federal, ALDF) in July of this year.

The measure gives the Mexico City mayor the power to create a new commission that will recommend specific steps to protect journalists and human rights advocates. Among other things, the law recognizes the work of journalists and human rights advocates as activities that are in the public interest. The initiative pledges to guarantee the physical, psychological, moral, and economic well-being of journalists who are at risk because of the nature of the work. The protections apply to family members and collaborators of the journalists and human rights advocates.

Mancera said his administration has a clear commitment to protect journalists and human rights defenders, and should be held accountable if it does not comply with its pledge.

The Mexico City measure carries a good deal of legitimacy because the journalists' rights organization Artículo 19 endorsed the initiative at a ceremony in Mexico City.

Other international journalists' rights groups also expressed their conditional support, including Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF). "RSF celebrates this initiative, but our organization will remain vigilant to ensure that this measure is applied in an effective manner," said the Paris-based organization. "This law could serve as an example for other states in the rest of the country, at a time when journalists who work in Mexico are facing extreme danger."

While Mancera was celebrating the new initiative, his attorney general Rodolfo Ríos Garza came under strong criticism for conducting the investigation of the murder of Espinosa, human rights defender Nadia Vera, and three other people as a simple crime motivated by robbery. Critics say the Procuraduría General de Justicia del Distrito Federal (PGJDF) has omitted important information—such as evidence that the victims were tortured—and has leaked data intended to discredit the victims.

The PGJDF's investigation led to the arrest of Daniel Pacheco Gutiérrez, a former convict who had been convicted of rape and assault in 2000 and had served a five-year sentence. Still, many questions remain unanswered, including a theory that the Mexico City prosecutor might be covering up for Veracruz Gov. Javier Duarte, who is said to have ordered the killings.

Quintana Roo law receives mixed support

Legislators in Quintana Roo state also overwhelmingly approved legislation that would improve protection for journalists and human rights defenders in the state. The measure, which was promoted by Gov. Roberto Borge Angulo, was approved by a vote of 21-1. Pedro José Flota Alcocer, president of the Quintana Roo state legislature, described the measure as groundbreaking legislation developed with the input of citizens, journalists, and defenders of human rights.

While some journalists associations in Quintana Roo provided significant input in developing the measure, the approval among representatives of the media was not universal. Artículo 19 criticized limitations in the initiative, which applied protections only to those who practiced journalism on a "permanent" basis. "This is a true act of simulation on the part of [Gov. Borge]," said the organization. "He has been an enemy of the independent press."

Journalists in Michoacán and Querétaro are also lobbying their state legislatures to approve initiatives to protect journalists. The initiative is already in progress in Michoacán, where the state legislature in early August gave the first reading to a measure that journalists proposed in 2014.

In Querétaro, a group of journalists—comprising reporters, editors, photographers, cartoonists, and college students majoring in communications—presented the state legislature with a petition signed by 182 members of the profession urging the legislative body to pass a law to protect anyone who practices journalism in the state.

"This document was the result of a series of meetings and forums that took place in 2013, 2014, and 2015 to address the conditions required for the exercise of journalism in our state," the supporters of the measure said in a communiqué.

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