

Press Release Guatemala City, Guatemala, May 17, 2023

## Guatemala: No press freedom, no democracy

***We call on authorities to respect and protect freedom of expression and freedom of the press as necessary conditions to guarantee democracy and the legitimacy of the electoral process.***

A month before the national elections, the undersigned organisations participated in and/or supported an observation mission to Guatemala to analyse the state of press freedom in this country. Mission participants spoke with journalists and communicators across the country to learn more about the circumstances in which they work and the challenges they face. They interviewed media executives and directors, civil society representatives and State authorities to learn about their efforts to guarantee freedom of the press.

**The mission's conclusions are extremely worrisome, not only for the right of journalists and communicators to inform the public, but for the essential right of citizens to receive this information in order to make their own free and conscious decisions.**

In Guatemala, a system of intimidation, silencing, and restrictions on the free exercise of journalism is intensifying. In a country where only 16% of the population trusts the Supreme Electoral Tribunal as guarantor of a democratic electoral process (as per a recent survey by *Prensa Libre*), such restrictions on the press may further tarnish the credibility of the upcoming election.

The persecution of journalists is not a new development in Guatemala. The press – especially community media in areas of the country where national and international companies work in tandem with organised crime and local public officials to silence journalistic investigations – has historically faced threats.

**The mission has observed that the press is increasingly seen as a threat to an alliance between the State and private actors seeking to control institutions, sustain corrupt arrangements, and perpetuate impunity in this country. Hence, the harassment and criminalization of journalists and communicators has become a new form of censorship.** This trend began during the government of Jimmy Morales, intensified under the administration of Alejandro Giammattei, and could worsen during the elections.

The judicial persecution of José Rubén Zamora and journalists from *El Periódico*, including efforts to financially starve this media outlet, ultimately leading to its closure on Monday, is an example of how this repressive system selects strategic targets to create intimidating examples for the press in general. Daring to denounce the corruption and impunity embedded in the Guatemalan state was enough to trigger this persecution. Unfortunately, the case of *El Periódico* was not an isolated incident.

**On the eve of elections, in a country claiming to be a democracy, this mission noted other worrisome cases for various forms of journalism, including the persecution of Carlos Choc and Robinson Ortega, the arbitrary incarceration of Anastasia Mejía, the illegal detention of Norma Sancir, and the attacks endured by Sonny Figueroa.**

Journalists often leave their columns or articles unsigned for fear of reprisals. Reporters have become targets when summoned to testify to reveal their confidential sources and have been included among the defendants when covering high-profile criminal cases. At least 20 journalists have left the country after receiving threats or being criminally charged for coverage that exposed powerful figures. Others are under surveillance, or have received death threats, sometimes from political candidates. The arbitrary use of official state advertising and government pressure on advertisers reinforces efforts to silence media. The attacks by coordinated computer networks such as the *Fundación Contra el Terrorismo*, resulting in constant digital harassment and intimidation, encourage self-censorship by reporters. Sexism, racism, homophobia, and class-based attacks, as well as other intersections, are aggravating factors for the violence endured by journalists in the course of doing their work.

The institutional response to these issues has been lacking. Although Guatemala has a specialised prosecution unit for crimes against journalists, most cases of intimidation and aggression against the press go uninvestigated and unpunished, such as the recent cases of homicide, including that of Mario Ortega (2020). All journalists and civil society representatives interviewed as part of this mission expressed distrust of this institution. The Human Rights Ombudsman's Office, which should follow up on cases of aggression against the press, is also failing to fulfil its mandate in this regard. While the State is wholly ineffective in investigating attacks against the press and protecting journalists, it is quick to accuse and criminalise them.

Access to state information is restricted. The law that should in theory guarantee access to public information is unenforced, in clear violation of the right of the population to scrutinise the work of public officials. This lack of transparency also affects the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, where an internal *memorandum* prevents officials from speaking to the press.

**In light of this grave scenario, the mission has concluded that without a free and independent press there can be no free and fair elections, and without free and fair elections there can be no true democracy. Thus, the Guatemalan State must take urgent measures to guarantee the right to inform and be informed.**

**Therefore, we call on public authorities to respect and protect freedom of expression and of the press as a condition to guarantee democracy and the legitimacy of the electoral process. It must establish safe and favourable conditions for the exercise of journalistic work throughout the country. At the same time, the mission urges the international community not to neglect its duty to promote and defend human rights throughout the world.**

Finally, the mission recognizes the courageous work of journalists and communicators in Guatemala and their contribution to the construction of a more just, pluralistic and democratic society.

**Signatory organisations:**

ARTICLE 19 for Mexico and Central America  
Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)  
Free Press Unlimited  
Freedom House  
Fundación para la Libertad de Prensa (FLIP)  
Fundamedios  
IFEX-ALC  
Protection International Mesoamerica  
Reporters Without Borders (RSF)  
Voces del Sur

